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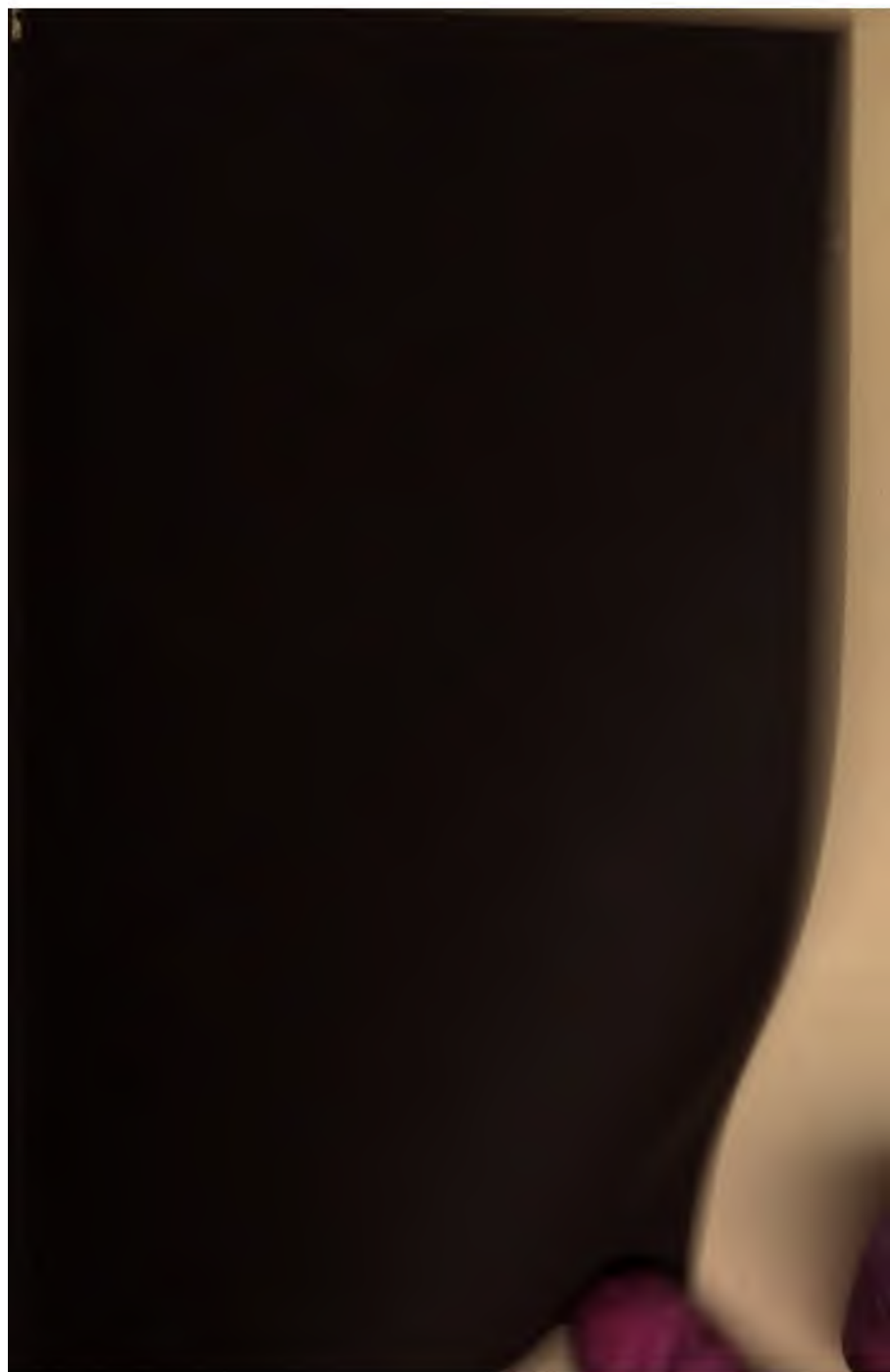
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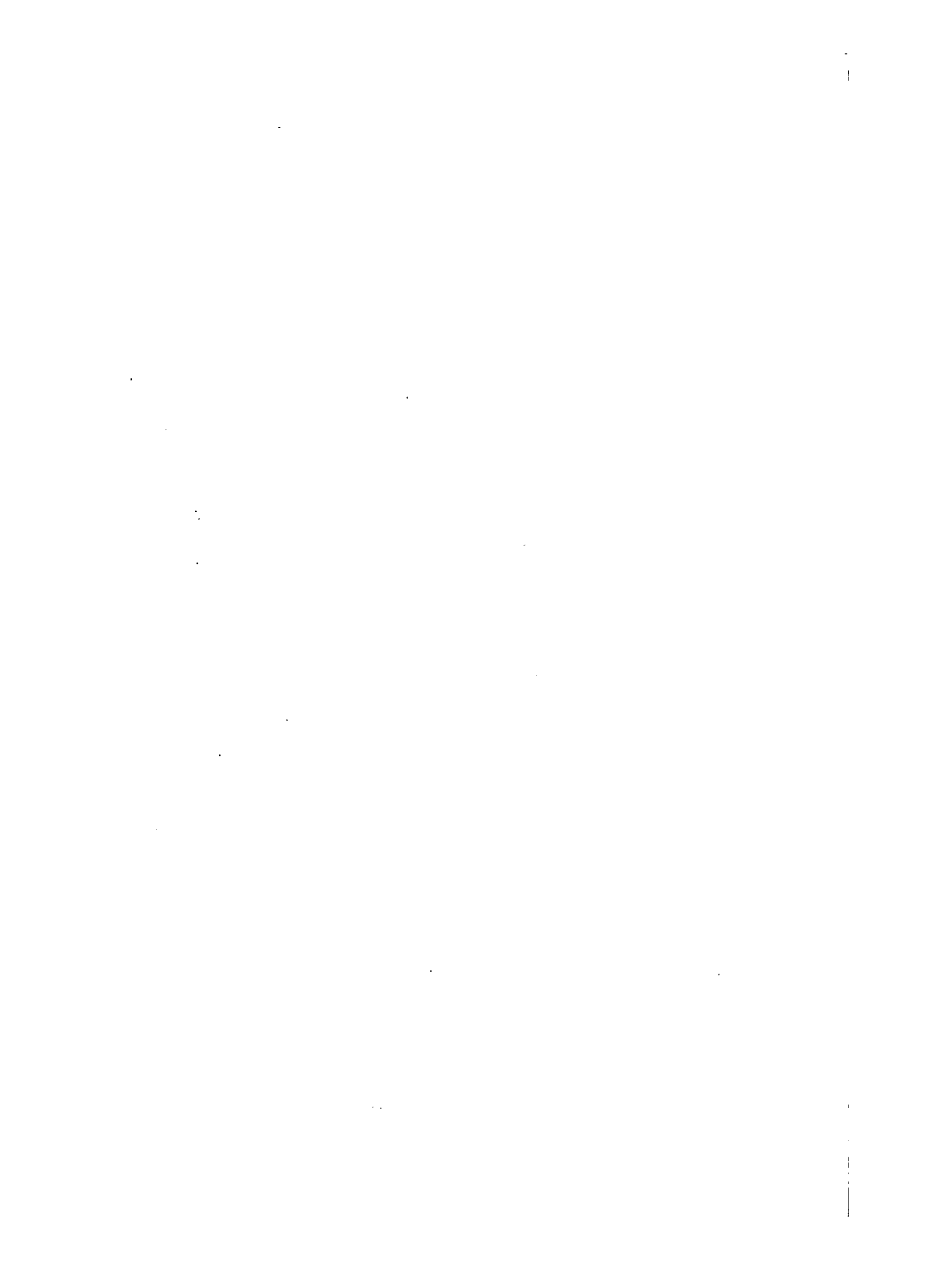
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A DOUBTING HEART.



A DOUBTING HEART.

BY

ANNIE KEARY,

AUTHOR OF "CASTLE DALY," "OLDBURY," ETC.

In Three Volumes.

VOL. II.



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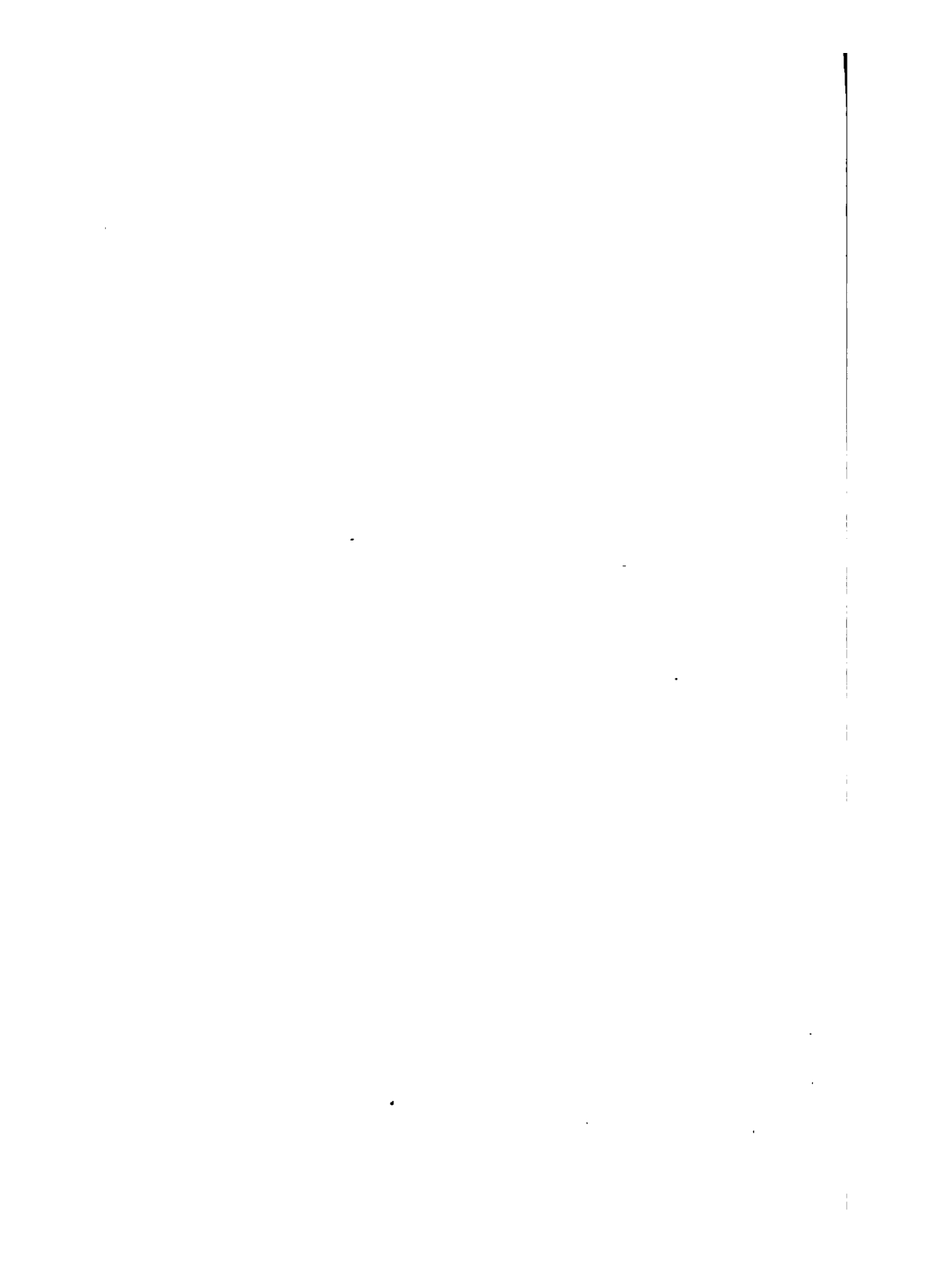
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A DOUBTING HEART.

CHAPTER I.

ROSE-COLOURED RIBBONS.

For whom
Grimy nakedness dragging his trucks,
And laying his trams in a poisoned gloom,
Wrought, till he crept from a gutted mine
Master of half a servile shire.

THE heroism with which Emmie had armed herself for her visit appeared at first to have been a little uncalled-for. The anticipated trials did not come, and the disagreeables that cropped up as the days passed on were so unlike those expected that Emmie actually did not discover them to be grievances till the time for bearing them was almost over. She would not be so inconsistent as to complain of being shut up in her aunt's room out of the way of all but distant glimpses of the gaieties going on in other parts of the house, when she had lately told Katherine Moore that it was the being obliged to go into company that she dreaded. Yet it must be confessed that when the first strangeness of the great house and the

many servants was over, such a longing for home would seize her and send her, towards the close of a long afternoon, into such disgraceful fits of yawning, that she was frequently obliged to make her escape from the close, scented atmosphere of Lady Rivers's dressing-room and bring herself into wideawake order again by peering over the balusters to the chief staircase, up which a group of afternoon callers would perhaps be ascending, in full view of Emmie's sleepy disconsolate eyes.

It was very silly, she told herself, to feel disconsolate by about the end of the first week, and to wish, oh, so vehemently, that a flight upstairs or down would bring her to Air Throne, or land her in the regions where she and Mary Ann were accustomed to hold discussions and work out experiments, which gave the dinners and teas that resulted therefrom a better flavour than Aunt Rivers seemed to find in her dainty little meals. Yes, it was very weak-minded to grow home-sick after such a short absence, when another week would bring her back to the old cares and to what she had been used to call the gloom of Saville Street; and with little news to impart to the others, for really, except during the moments of those stolen peeps on to the staircase, anyone might come to the house without her being the wiser, even *the* one person who would come expecting to find Emmie West in the

drawing-room, and who might possibly feel a little disappointed at her non-appearance.

One day while Emmie was looking over the balusters, a stout, long-trained lady, with a dazzling bird-of-paradise in her bonnet, suddenly looked upwards, and so evidently saw something in the distant perspective of the winding staircase to arrest her attention, that a tall young man who was following lifted up his face and saw too—only the top of a retreating head Emmie hoped, for, though the first glance had somehow fascinated her and kept her for quite a second staring down into the broad, smiling, good-humouredly inquisitive face that was turned up towards her, she had presence of mind to dart away before the younger pair of equally good-humoured inquisitive eyes had quite found her out. A sudden suspicion, turned into certainty by a moment's thought, shot through her and caused her to tingle all over. Yes, those were the Kirkmans: the mother and son whose names Aunt Rivers brought forward so constantly in her conversations with Emmie, and introduced even into those gossipy confidences with her nurse, which Alma used to frown upon.

The next day, and the next at the same hour, Emmie cautiously peeped again, just long enough to see the glitter of the paradise feather nodding on the drawing-

room landing, then she retreated into the dressing-room, robbed, she felt, of even the poor dissipation of watching the stairs, and devoted herself for the rest of the afternoon to reading aloud to her aunt: somewhat monotonously, it is to be feared, for her thoughts were all the while revolving round and round one point—the possibility, namely, that another caller might come to the house and be shown into the drawing-room while that keen-eyed young man and his smiling mother were talking to Alma. Through a whole chapter of a novel filled with the most thrilling incidents Emmie would continue to see mentally one series of little pictures only. A figure mounting the staircase—the drawing-room door thrown open—and then the change that would come on a certain person's face as soon as a glance into the room had made him aware of its occupants. Next she wondered how it would be if, instead of being shut up here, she were seated down there, say by the fireplace, or in the window recess; would the new-comer, for want of something else to do, stroll up to her, and should she be able to say anything to soften the disgust and pain she could picture so surely on his face.

But it was only in the afternoons, during the hours when afternoon tea and callers prevailed in the drawing-room, that Emmie was guilty of monotonous reading

aloud, or indeed of any other symptom of want of sympathy with the invalid who claimed her attention. On all other occasions she proved a most agreeable sick-room companion, and had only herself to thank if Lady Rivers found so much pleasure in her society that she could not bring herself to forego it even for an hour or two. It was sheer selfishness that caused her imprisonment, for Lady Rivers was too much engrossed just then with her own ailments to notice the unfashionable make of Emmie's winter dress : she only kept her shut up because such a listener as Emmie was too great a boon to be shared with anyone who did not need the comfort of sympathy as much as she did.

It was something quite new to Lady Rivers to talk about her troubles to a person who looked up with interested instead of critical eyes, puzzled perhaps but still believing, and in spite of past prejudices, Emmie was such a person. Her nature was so essentially sympathetic that while Lady Rivers talked with her accustomed eloquence of complaint she could not help being mesmerised into an answering feeling of compassion. Possibly, after all, it was a worse state of things to live in a great, plentiful house, where everybody, from its master to the youngest of the servants, occupied themselves mainly in spiting and thwarting the mistress, in

the fashion Aunt Rivers described, than like her mother to be struggling against the spite and thwarting that came from an empty purse only. Certainly her mother found less to say about her grievances and fewer people to feel bitter against. Poor Aunt Rivers !

And when Emmie tried her hand timidly at condolence, and brought forward, by way of tonic, stoical maxims learned from Katherine Moore, the conversations still flowed on amicably enough. Her velvety brown eyes quite melted with pity and sweetness as she spoke, and it never occurred to Lady Rivers that Emmie West could be recommending contempt of riches, or indifference to the good things of this world to *her*. In her own opinion she stood secure on an eminence of aristocracy that involved obligations of its own, and she could listen to moralities, applicable to persons whose inferior station in life laid a different order of duties on them, without the least stirring of conscience.

Contentment was no virtue for *her*, who had always found she could gain any point she set her heart upon by worrying long enough, though it might shine sweetly as a grace in people who mismanaged their family affairs as poor sister West had done. It was, however, gratifying to find virtue in its right place, and Lady Rivers would put out her white jewelled fingers, and reward Emmie's

hesitating little sermon with a pat on her cheek, or a caressing touch of her hair, while Emmie wondered and glowed with gratitude, and felt almost as strangely distinguished as if she had seen the stone statue in the square gardens come down from its pedestal, and hold out a welcoming hand.

“That child is really wonderfully pretty,” Sir Francis remarked one day, after Emmie had left the room when he had come in and surprised one of those beaming looks of gratitude on her face. “I don’t wonder at your keeping her hidden away here, my dear, if, like Madame de Sévigné, you hold to your reputation of mothering *la plus jolie fille à marier* in the market at present. You have never met Madame de Sévigné you say, and don’t know her daughter; that is your loss, my love, and perhaps also hers, for I think she would have written a very pleasant letter about you if she had had the luck to know you. No, she is not a *person* who has been putting notions into my head about Emmie West. I spoke simply from my own observation, and I am sorry that it differs from yours, for, proud as I am of Alma, my conscience will never let me say that her nose is as well formed, or her complexion so good as her cousin’s, now I have remarked the difference. However, as you find Emmie West’s looks only tolerable, don’t you think that

you might allow her a little more liberty, and show your confidence in Alma's supremacy by venturing the other into the drawing-room sometimes? It would be only common humanity, and might be indulged in without much risk, I should think. Horace Kirkman is too far gone in infatuation for Alma's grey eyes to be disturbed by those pretty brown ones of Emmie's, unless I am much mistaken, and if he could be so disturbed, I think we could all survive his defection. Your suspense would be over, at all events, and you could betake yourself, with Alma, to the south of France, where Dr. Urquhart urges me to send you till the spring winds are over in England. You would be free to go then without being reproached by your maternal conscience for taking your daughter out of the way of a splendid match, to promote which you have, I am afraid, been perilling your life all the winter."

This remonstrance was, presumably, repeated afterwards in some less irritating form, and enforced by conjugal arguments, to which Lady Rivers succumbed. The next morning Emmie found herself released from attendance, and had the agreeable choice offered her of accompanying her uncle in the carriage to his law court, and of visiting a circulating library on her way back to select a fresh supply of novels for her aunt's afternoon reading—dissipations not to be despised by a young

person to whom a drive even in a street cab was a distinct pleasure, and who had, moreover, a hazy kind of interest in law courts, having given a few moments sometimes to wondering how "people" looked in wigs and gowns whose faces without the wigs had become a standard of pleasantness. Did it alter a person much—would a friendly face in a wig look old and dignified, and could one reasonably expect such a one to be just going in, or just coming out, of that legal temple before which Uncle Rivers's carriage would draw up? Might one even venture to shake hands with a friend in a wig, and explain to him how one was situated with respect to afternoon callers?

Sir Francis Rivers did not interrupt a careful reasoning out of these problems by any ill-advised attempts at conversation during the rapid progress of the brougham which conveyed himself and his niece through "miles of London." He had come out of the house and put himself into the carriage with that peculiar expression on his face, hair flying, eyes fixed, lips working without any corresponding sound proceeding from them, which had inspired Casabianca with the notion of drawing a likeness of his uncle, as "Johnny Head-in-Air," and through the hour's drive there might just as well have been a bundle of rags on the seat opposite him as Emmie West for any

impression conveyed to his mind by her presence. No need to care how shabby one's hat and jacket were in a drive with Uncle Rivers. The cessation of the motion when the brougham drew up did not bring Sir Francis down from the clouds all at once. He seized a bundle of papers, threw himself out, and was bustling down a long passage, which Emmie searched with her eyes in vain, when something seemed to stop his course suddenly. He turned round and came back to the carriage, "Johnny Head-in-Air" no longer, but that other edition of Uncle Rivers, whose keen glance, critical or kind, seemed to go down to the bottom of one's mind, and read one's thoughts.

"My child," he said, "I have not given James any orders where to drive. You must tell him yourself where you would like to go. Now you are out for the morning, you will be disposed for a little shopping, no doubt. Girls always want to buy ribbons or something, and I dare say you forgot to bring your purse out with you. There, tuck that into your little glove, and say nothing about it to anyone, but tell James to take you where you can spend it as you like."

He was gone quite to the end of the dark passage before Emmie had had presence of mind to smooth out the transparent bit of paper, whose crisp touch was so

unfamiliar to her. It was actually a ten-pound note, and for the first moment or two the almost awful sense of responsibility in having to deal with such a sum brought Emmie more fright than pleasure. Ribbons, indeed! What could Uncle Rivers be thinking about? Did he know what he was doing, or ought one to keep the note untouched and remonstrate at dinner-time? A recollection of the half smile that played round his lips when he said, "Say nothing about it to anyone," was answer enough to this scruple. Perhaps a habit of giving away ten-pound notes inadvertently was one of the peculiarities which Lady Rivers found so trying in her husband.

With this suspicion, Emmie felt a new responsibility laid on her, not to get her benefactor into trouble. It was, moreover, impossible to keep the stately James waiting for orders at the door of the carriage a moment longer; and, on the spur of necessity, Emmie named a shop where Alma had, she knew, been making purchases the day before. During the long drive her tumultuous thoughts had time to settle themselves into a brilliant kaleidoscope picture of delight, her very fears and scruples fitting in as white lights to heighten the colours.

Yes, yes; she had been told to spend all this money as she pleased, and she would do as she was bid, and for

once supply the wants of the feminine side of the household at home with a liberal hand. Her mother's first, then Mildie's, then her own; and there might even remain, when all these are provided for, something over and above wherewith to buy that Christmas present for Mary Ann, which her mother had been so sorrowfully obliged to omit this year. Here was, indeed, a happy morning's work laid out. Yet the purchasing of her presents, when the time came for it, did not take so long as might have been expected. The wants to be supplied were not by any means fancy ones, and had been discussed between Emmie and her mother so often, that she had no difficulty in making up her mind what to buy. Just the very things they had talked of as needful, but impossible to come by, on many a long, rainy afternoon over their mending. Only, now that she had this money in hand of her very own, Emmie decided that the warm shawl for her mother should be softer and finer and of a prettier shade of grey than they had dared to dream of when they spoke of buying it some day, and that Mildie's new hat and her own might be chosen for once with more regard to what was becoming than to what was cheap—just for this once. The giving her home address as the destination of her purchases caused Emmie to colour violently, and almost tremble in her shoes, for she could

not help fancying the shopman looked surprised, as if he knew the house, and thought her lavishness something monstrous. She recovered her equanimity, however, in the satisfaction of choosing one or two pretty things for herself, such as had never been so much as spoken of in Saville Street, ribbons and gloves and bows for her hair, that were to accompany her back to Eccleston Square, and be worn on occasions when she might make them pretexts for a word, or at all events, a look of gratitude directed towards her kind uncle. He might notice her finery and give her one of his knowing smiles, or just as probably he might remain "Johnny Head-in-the-Air" for all the rest of her visit. Anyhow, the interest of having a private understanding about her ribbons with Uncle Rivers, would remain the same. It would be something amusing to think about, and would make her feel more at home in the house, more like a person whose existence had been recognised outside the sick-room, than she had felt hitherto. That was surely consequence enough to predict for a few yards of ribbon; but Emmie's purchases had a more important part to play than the one she anticipated, and before she had done with them they got twisted round two or three rather significant events, which gave a colour to the remaining days of her visit not altogether their own *couleur de rose*.

The first link of this ribbon-chain was a natural one enough, and was woven under the very circumstances Emmie had foreseen, and on the evening of the important drive. As there chanced to be no guests at dinner that day, and as an old neighbour had unexpectedly come in to sit an hour with Lady Rivers, Emmie was invited to accompany Alma downstairs, and had the pleasure of putting on her brightest set of ribbons, before she had possessed them many hours.

Sir Francis remained silent and unobserving all dinner-time; but when the dessert was put upon the table he woke up, or rather tumbled down from some region of speculation into his own dining-room, and catching sight of Emmie seated opposite, he twinkled a confidential look across the table at her. Emmie thought it was the rose-coloured knots on her bosom and in her hair that attracted his attention and caused him to gaze on her approvingly for quite two minutes; but, perhaps, it was another sort of rose-bloom, deepening and deepening under his gaze, that had chiefly to do with the undoubted pleasure his kindly eyes expressed. To save herself from appearing conscious, Emmie tried to turn her attention to the business of choosing from the fruit Alma offered to her, something that could not possibly have come from Golden Mount. On former occasions,

when she had dined downstairs, no one had noticed her curious preference for the least inviting fruits on the table, but to-day Sir Francis was watching her closely, and he exclaimed at the result of her long deliberation :

“What are you thinking of, child ? Why you have picked out the only pear in the dish that is not worth eating. Where are your eyes ? Let me choose for you.”

“No, thank you, uncle ; I like the little pears best—I do, indeed ! ”

“Ah, you have never tasted a Golden Mount monster ! It combines all the fruit-flavours in the world, from pine-apples to strawberries. Come, pass the dish ! I will pare one, and you shall divide it with me.”

“No, thank you, uncle. Please, don’t ! I had rather not, *indeed !*” said Emmie, feeling that Alma was looking at her, and hardly knowing the amount of unnecessary earnestness and resolution she put into her second indeed.

“Hallo ! What’s the matter ?” cried Sir Francis, greatly amused. “Is it a fast-day, or is this some pretty little penance we have imposed on ourself, eh ?”

“Yes, what is it, Emmie ?” said Alma, in a low, slightly scornful voice, which somehow put Emmie on her mettle.

“I don’t want to eat any of Mr. Kirkman’s fruit, because——”

"Well, my dear, go on, because—how has Mr. Kirkman been so unlucky as to offend you?" asked Sir Francis.

Emmie's courage was ebbing fast, so she stuck to her first beginning.

"Because it would be sharing the spoil, and I don't think one ought to do it."

"Emmie has got hold of some of the popular prejudices against Mr. Kirkman," observed Alma; "she does not of course know anything about him."

"I do," said Emmie, looking full into Alma's eyes; "I understand a great deal more than you think."

Alma's eyes fell under something she read in Emmie's; and Sir Francis, a good deal surprised, continued the conversation.

"I did not know you were a politician, or a political economist, my dear. You can't really know anything about Mr. Kirkman's ways of making money. I don't suppose you have ever heard a single fact of his life."

"I know one thing," said Emmie, her voice trembling between timidity and indignation. "Mamma, who knew him long ago, told me that when he was managing a mine in the neighbourhood where she lived then, he used to pay the people who worked for him in goods instead of money, and that he cheated the women and children

by selling them bad food. I think these great pears and grapes of his that are made out of all those people's hunger ought not to taste well to him, and I should not like to help him to eat them."

There was a moment's awful silence after Emmie had ended her eloquent speech. Alma picked up one of the big pears, which Sir Francis had half drawn out of the dish, and restored it carefully to its former position in the pyramid of which it had formed a part, and Sir Francis drummed with three fingers on the knuckles of his left hand, smiling all the time as if he was determined not to let himself be embarrassed by what a pink and white faced chit, like the one before him, could say, and yet had not a crushing answer ready.

"Ah, there is Horace Kirkman's knock at the front door," he said at last. "He takes it pretty much for granted that he is welcome to spend his evenings here—that young fellow. Emmie had better run up quickly to mamma, I think, for if she and Horace Kirkman meet while she is in this red hot state, we shall have a new version of the battle between the 'doves and the cranes' enacted on the premises."

Emmie did not wait for a second permission to escape, but she felt very miserable as she untied her rose-coloured ribbons in her own room before going to her

aunt, to read aloud to her for the rest of the evening, while Alma played and sang in the drawing-room to Horace Kirkman.

Had she been very ungrateful? Had she taken more upon herself than she had any right to do, for, after all, what business was it of hers, if Alma chose to marry Horace Kirkman? Of one thing she felt certain—she had offended Alma, and must not expect anything but cold looks and distant words from her during the rest of her visit to Eccleston Square. For this she could not help grieving. Alma had shown her many little acts of kindness lately, and however hard she tried, Emmie could not live for ten days in the same house with her cousin, without falling so far under her fascination, as to care a great deal about the sort of looks she had from her. The surprise was all the sweeter, when quite late that evening, just as Emmie had taken the last pin out of her hair, there came a little tap at the door of her room, and Alma's face looked in.

"What, no fire!" she said, "and it is quite a cold night; how lazy of the housemaids! I must speak about it to-morrow; but my room is next door; bring your brush and comb there, and we will have a talk over my fire."

It was the first time that Alma had ever given such an

invitation, and Emmie felt considerably flattered, especially when she found that the talk was to be a real *tête-à-tête*; the maid had gone to relieve guard in Lady Rivers's room, and Alma was dealing with her shining plaits herself, and looked as ready for a gossip as ever did Christabel Moore when she stole down to Emmie's chilly little bedroom from the attics, in evening dishabille, for a specially confidential chat. This room of Alma's was something of a contrast to that other one, and Emmie felt wrapt in a dream of comfort and luxury, as she sat on a low stool by a blazing fire and watched the little streams of gold dropping through Alma's white fingers as she unfastened her braids and shook the rippling glory all about her. In this one respect, in spite of Sir Francis's disparagement, there was no comparison between the cousins. Emmie's soft dusky hair was well enough, and made just the right setting for the perfect oval of her face, but Alma's hair was a distinct beauty in itself—its crisp, wilful waves and fitful lights and pale glooms seeming as full of individuality and character as everything else about her. Emmie took up and stroked a long coil of hair that had rippled down to where she sat, and said, "I wish Christabel Moore could see it."

"Christabel is the little pale one, who always gets behind her sister, is she not?" asked Alma indifferently.

"She is the artist," answered Emmie; "that is why I wish she could see you just now with your hair down."

It was the nearest approach to a compliment that Emmie had ever ventured on, and Alma, reading the sincerity with which it was offered, in Emmie's admiring eyes, repaid it by asking a few questions about the Moores, hitherto a tabooed subject in Eccleston Square. She did not expect to be interested in hearing the history of her aunt's lodgers, but she was; her questions came quicker, and after one long answer from Emmie, Alma sat musing silently, quite forgetting to roll up the coils of hair she held in her hand.

"I could do that," she said at last decidedly. "The kind of life you have described is not hard. I don't think I should object to toil, or even poverty, if I had got straight down to it once for all, and if there was nobody who had expected better things of me, looking on to reproach and complain over me. Emmie, I don't know why I say this to you; I don't think that till to-night I minded very much what you might be thinking of me, but I feel now as if I must ask you, once for all, not to judge me hardly for anything you may hereafter hear of my doing—not very hardly. Unless you could stand exactly where I do, and feel all the influences round me, all the little threads pulling me,

you couldn't judge fairly. You don't know how hard it is to resist what comes to one with the very air one breathes, or how often when I think of doing some things, I wish for a hand to be stretched out strong enough to save me from myself—from that half of myself which everybody about me feeds while the other starves."

There was a short silence when Alma finished, for Emmie's breath was coming so quickly that she could not command her voice to speak at once, and besides, could she have understood rightly? Did Alma mean her to understand, and might she answer in the only words that her conscience would let her speak after such an appeal, though the very thought of speaking them brought a chill feeling as of a cold wind blowing through her heart.

"I think the hand is stretched out," she said at last, "but you won't see it. I—I wish you would. Alma, dear Alma, I wish you would."

Alma finished putting up her hair, and then she bent down and kissed Emmie between her eyes.

"You are all trembling and cold," she said. "Poor child, I ought not to keep you up late when you tire yourself out waiting on mamma all day. You are a good little thing, Emmie—a good little thing, and I am glad

we know each other better now than we did before you stayed here; but your world is so different from mine, you must try not to judge me."

"Good-night, then," said Emmie, making a necklace of her arms so as to hold down Alma's face near her own till she had finished what she wanted to say; "I am only a little thing compared to you, but let me just tell you what Katherine Moore——"

"No," cried Alma, smiling, "not what Katherine Moore says; I won't hear a word more of hers to-night. She is miles above me, and she knows nothing of me and my world."

"Then I will say something quite new to you," Emmie whispered; "something that I have never said to myself before. Whatever your world may be like, I don't think it will be worth living in, if you let love slip out of it. Don't do that, Alma, for you can help it if you will."

"Can I? Good-night. It is actually striking twelve, and I cannot let you speak another word to-night," said Alma.

CHAPTER II.

MRS. KIRKMAN'S KISS.

Dancez, chantez, villageois, la nuit tombe—Sabine, un jour,
A tout donné—sa beauté de colombe—et son amour—
Pour l'anneau d'or du Comte de Saldagne—pour un bijou !
Le vent qui vient à travers la montagne, me rendra fou, oui, me rendra
fou.

EMMIE got up next morning with a strong impression on her mind that "silence was golden," and she made several firm resolutions while she was dressing, about the careful government of her tongue during the remaining portion of her visit to Eccleston Square. Only two days more now; surely she should be able to live through them without falling foul of any subject that would again force words from her lips such as she could not remember afterwards without agonies of shyness. She comforted herself with the assurance that there seemed every prospect of a quiet, uneventful time, to be spent monotonously in Lady Rivers's dressing-room, for she found, on leaving her room, that Alma had had a note from Constance, begging her to take the opportunity of Emmie's

being with their mother to spend two days with her, and Sir Francis was sure to take himself out of the way, in the evenings of Alma's absence.

The first day passed smoothly enough to put Emmie off her guard, but on the next, on the very last day of her visit, unexpected trials of temper assailed her, culminating towards evening in a great stress of circumstance that brought her face to face with a self she had not known before to be alive within her. For five strange, fire-lit minutes this new, unexpected Emmie West woke up, and, as it were, stood forth and spoke outside the childish, familiar one, and then, in a great silence that followed the outburst of speech, the new, passionate self had to be taken back and shut up a prisoner, under bonds that one hoped might not have to be broken ever again. But all this happened at the end of a long, trying day; such self-revelations, such comings out of the kernel of the being to act irrespectively of old habits, do not occur without a great deal of previous emotion to lead up to them.

The rose-coloured ribbons again formed a link in the chain of small events that led to Emmie's second outburst of loquacity. Feeling the need of something to brighten her spirits, for Lady Rivers had been in a complaining temper all day, Emmie had adorned herself early in the afternoon with some shreds of her new

finery, and Dr. Urquhart, who had lately taken to paying long afternoon visits in Eccleston Square, and indulging his patient with a good deal of conversation after his professional duties were ended, chanced once or twice, in a semi-absent way, to fix his eyes while he was talking, on the bright ribbon that fastened Emmie's dark hair, being puzzled perhaps to account for such an appearance on *her* head. Either this circumstance or something unusual in his manner when he took leave of Emmie, put a sudden new thought into Lady Rivers's mind, which interested her so much as to make her forego the just anger she might have felt against a physician for having eyes for anyone but herself while visiting her. She magnanimously put this offence aside in her eagerness to follow out the discovery, and she experienced quite a glow of good-humour in consequence of her self-conquest.

"Urquhart," she began meditatively, as soon as the door had closed behind the doctor. "Urquhart, that is a Scotch name, and a good one, I fancy. Do you happen to know, Emmie, whether these Urquharts of yours are related to Sir Colin Urquhart of Glen Urst? Your uncle spent a day once with Sir Colin when we were in Scotland, and I would take an opportunity of mentioning the circumstance to Dr. Graham Urquhart if I thought it would do any good."

"What good could it do?" said Emmie, looking puzzled. "I believe Sir Colin Urquhart is what Mrs. Urquhart calls a far-away cousin of theirs, but why should Dr. Urquhart care to know that Uncle Rivers has visited him?"

"My dear child, you don't understand these matters, and your poor mother is of course out of the way of thinking of them. It does not signify, however, as you have, fortunately, some one to take a little care for you when the right time comes. Long before then, my mind will be quite free from all my present cares." Lady Rivers took a few moments for thought and then continued, more to herself than to Emmie: "But no, I am not glad to hear of Dr. Urquhart's connection with the baronet, the owner of Glen Urst, a splendid place, I can tell you, Emmie. Scotch people think a great deal about family when they happen to have it, and unfortunately your father's bankruptcy was made so public, and now your poor mother's miserably ill-judged step of letting lodgings—even our connection would hardly outweigh that with Scotch people—but," raising her voice and looking at her niece again, "never mind, Emmie, you have pleased me very much since you came here, and I never mean to let you slip quite away from us again. We shall be a great deal together by-and-by, no doubt:

when Alma is married she will be so sought after, and so much engaged in society, that I, like an unselfish mother as I am, shall have to make up my mind to see very little of her, and then I shall lay claim to you, my dear, altogether. You will live here almost entirely, I daresay, by-and-by, and I shall have many little plans and schemes for you too. You will see, my dear."

Emmie's cheeks were blazing by this time, and she now rose from her seat and stood full in front of Lady Rivers's sofa, looking at her with something in her eyes that almost took away her aunt's breath.

"I hope you will never make any plans for me, Aunt Rivers," she said. "I don't like it. I am sorry you made plans for Alma, and I hope you never will for me; I don't mean almost to live with you by-and-by, for I am wanted at home, and I had rather stay there, whatever may have happened to make people ashamed of us. The Urquharts are not ashamed of us; they are good friends of mamma's and mine, and we don't want them to be anything else. I hope you will never speak like that of them again, Aunt Rivers, or I can't come and nurse you next time that you send for me."

"My dear, what are you thinking about? Sit down—you startled me," said Lady Rivers, who was actually too much cowed by the indignation in Emmie's face,

to be, all at once, as angry as contradiction usually made her; "you are misunderstanding me, I'm sure, and you must not look at me in that way, when I am thinking of nothing but how to be kind to you. I wonder you have the heart. There, you see, you have quite shaken me, and I must have my drops again, or I shall not be able to settle comfortably, or get a wink of sleep the whole evening."

Emmie found and administered the drops and then resumed her seat by the sofa, but, though she said no more, there was still something in her face and manner which so roused Lady Rivers's instinct of self-justification, that she could not give the draught a fair chance of composing her, but felt obliged to launch out into fresh expostulations.

"You ought not to be so independent, Emmie, you ought not, indeed. A girl, with four brothers and a sister, all utterly without prospects, and with a mother in weak health, to say nothing of a father who has twice failed in business—not very creditably—a girl in such circumstances as these should be very humble, and thankful to anyone who speaks of holding out a hand to smooth her way in life. She should not have too much confidence in herself. Good looks are not everything, no, nor the power of winning favour either, if she

chances to have that. Why, even Alma has not found everything to her mind; she could tell you, if she pleased, how possible it is to be deceived and disappointed in people who appear at one time to be devoted to you. Whatever your uncle may choose to say, there is no one equal to Alma. I don't say it's impossible to have more beauty, but I do say that I never saw anyone who had such charming ways, or who made people get so fond of her; yet even Alma has not met in one quarter with the treatment she had a right to expect. You may well look surprised, my dear, but I am telling you this for a lesson, and also to show you that if I do seem a little over anxious about my dear Alma's prospects, it is not without provocation. I am not a schemer, with such daughters as mine I have had no occasion to scheme, but I naturally could not sit still quietly under the idea that Alma had been neglected. Happily that trouble is over now, and as things are turning out I am more than satisfied. We can look on the old disappointment as a great escape now, for even if Mr. Anstice had behaved as he ought, and avoided quarrelling with his uncle, he would never have been as good a match as Horace Kirkman, and I should never have liked him half as well."

"But Alma—but Alma herself?" said Emmie, in a breathless whisper.

"Alma is convinced that a girl may very well be mistaken in choosing for herself, and that it would be mere perversity in her to go on preferring a person who has once failed her."

"Does Alma think he failed," said Emmie, still in a half whisper; "does she call *that* failing?"

"My dear, you know nothing about it," answered Lady Rivers, a little impatiently. "A man of the world should know well enough that he has no right to aspire to a girl like Alma, unless he has something suitable to offer her, and if he wilfully throws away all his fine prospects for the sake of crotchets and scruples, that half the world don't understand, what can one think of his affection for her? A girl of spirit cannot possibly permit herself to be so treated."

"But if she knew he loved her all the time," persisted Emmie; "and that he hoped she would understand him, and like him the better for standing up for what was right, even at the risk of not getting her at once; then—oh, Aunt Rivers, do you suppose Alma does not know that?"

"You are talking great nonsense, I think, Emmie, and growing quite excited again. What is the use of my taking drops if you look at me in that startling way, and touch me with such a hot, trembling hand? I don't

understand you at all to-night, and I wish I had never begun to talk to you. What can you know about Alma and Wynyard Anstice more than I have told you! How can you possibly form an opinion on the subject,—an ignorant child who has never been anywhere!”

“I am sorry I touched you with a hot hand,” said Emmie, no longer in a whisper, but in a tone cold enough to heal the burning touch of her fingers, “and I am sorry we began to talk, since it has disturbed you so much, Aunt Rivers. Perhaps I had better leave you for a little while, and send Ward to give you your afternoon tea.”

“Yes, indeed, I think you had better go away, for you have not managed me at all well this afternoon, I must say, Emmie. Your uncle would have been quite surprised if he had heard the tone in which you spoke to me just now, and would have had less to say for the future about your sweetness of temper. However, you tell me you are sorry, and as I never take offence, I shall say no more about it, but allow you to come and read to me, after I have had my tea, as usual—and you may give me a kiss before you go, if you like. You had better go down into the drawing-room, I think. I did say I would see Mrs. Kirkman, if she called to-day, but I hardly feel equal to the exertion now. Mrs. Kirkman’s voice, and

her musk, and the rustle she makes with her dress in moving about are very overpowering when one is not feeling strong. I should like you to speak to her for me, Emmie, and to tell her that I am sorry I cannot see her, and that Alma will certainly be back to-morrow in time to keep her engagement for the flower show. Now, don't forget that part of the message, Emmie, and speak it as pleasantly as you can. There is no saying what good might not follow to your brothers, if Mrs. Kirkman were to take a fancy to you; and instead of looking proud and vexed, you ought to be grateful to me for giving you the chance of making a favourable impression on such an influential person."

Emmie gave the kiss required, with more reluctance than she had ever felt in bestowing a kiss, since long past nursery days, when the servants in Saville Street had been wont to remark that Miss Emmie had a pride and a will of her own for all her sweet looks. Then she betook herself to the drawing-room, hoping in that ample space to walk off the excitement that was making her heart beat so quickly and her cheek burn. She hoped devoutly that Mrs. Kirkman would not come just yet, not till she was in a fit state to meet her with the dignity and distance with which such an antagonist ought to be encountered. Her brothers, indeed! As if Harry and

Casabianca were of the sort to need that their sister should curry favour with anyone on their behalf! No, it would not do to think of that. Emmie's steps quickened and quickened, keeping pace with the rush of indignant feeling, till even the long drawing-room seemed a confined space to walk up and down in. Yet the thoughts that were waiting behind these surface ones were more agitating still—Alma—Mr. Anstice—that hint about Dr. Urquhart, which seemed to Emmie just then a cruel attempt to rob her of the one consoling spot in her life, by bringing bitterness and confusion into the very land of Beulah itself.

She left off pacing the room at last, finding it did her no good, and went and stood in the window recess between two great pyramids of rare exotics in pots, that had been sent from the Golden Mount conservatories the day before, and were filling every corner of the drawing-room with their strong spicy odours. It was raining out of doors a very deluge of rain; but even when standing quite close to the well-fitting double windows Emmie could only faintly catch the sound of the sweeping wind and rushing tempest, under which the trees in the Square garden were bending their black heads, while the foot-passengers on the pavement below cowered and fled to the nearest shelter. Outside in the storm seemed better

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one child, my Horace, who was from the first too sturdy a fellow to put up with much mother's petting, and I've always longed to get pretty young girl-things like you about me to make much of."

The full-blown, smiling face had got alarmingly near by this time. Emmie felt the warm, puffy breath on her cheek, and the Paradise feather nodding into her eyes. She could not put up her hand and push it away, that would be too naughty and childish, however vehemently she might wish such a course of action were possible; she could not even openly shrink, for it was a motherly face after all; she could only drop her chin an inch or so to save her pouting, quivering lips, and receive the sounding salute, when it came, in the middle of her forehead.

"There," said Mrs. Kirkman, laughing, and holding out both hands, "you'll know me again, my dear, when we meet next. Help me up from my seat, for I must be going, and I ain't as active as I used to be twenty years ago. I don't mind confessing it to you, but four sumptuous meals such as Mr. Kirkman will have put on the table every day at Kensington Park Gate ain't quite the thing for me, not being exactly what I was brought up to. Why, what a colour I have given you! And it was only an old woman's kiss, after all, not deserving of such a pretty blush as that to come after it. You must

take this fan of mine to cool your cheeks ; it came from Paris only yesterday, and maybe you'll find more use for it than I shall. What ! you say you had rather not take it ? My dear Miss West, but you must. I'm not one to be said 'no' to. That's something I've learned of my husband, and seeing how well it has answered with him, I hold to the lesson. Besides, you need not be so shy ; it's a pretty toy, I dare say, but I've a dozen others at home, and I really want you to keep this as a token that we are to be fast friends by-and-by, when——, well, as you shake your head, and don't seem to like me to say *when*, I won't finish my sentence, but leave it as a crow to be plucked between us on some gala day, when perhaps you'll be glad enough to escape with only my kisses ; Mr. Kirkman not being the man to let off such a pretty bridesmaid as you'll make, without giving him his due at his son's wedding."

Mrs. Kirkman had talked herself nearly to the door, and Emmie was following with a vain hope of being allowed to thrust the fan back into her hand at the last moment, when James's voice, announcing another guest, was heard close behind them. "Mr. Anstice."

It came like a thunder-clap on Emmie, just because, ten minutes ago, she had been planning how she would act, and what she would say, if such an unlikely circum-

stance as Mr. Anstice's appearance on this, her last afternoon, should fall out. Oh, why had fate taken her so cruelly at her word, and put the task she was dreading upon her so soon, before she had well had time to summon up resolution for it! She quite forgot her anxiety about the fan, and flitted back into the middle of the room before she took any notice of Mr. Anstice's entrance, feeling that the first necessity was to leave as great a space as possible between herself and Mrs. Kirkman, and put an end to those dreadful innuendoes of which (terrible thought) he might possibly have overheard a word or two.

In a moment the drawing-room door shut behind Mrs. Kirkman, and then, before Emmie had settled it with herself that most likely he had not heard, she felt, rather than saw, for she dared not look up, that Mr. Anstice had brought a chair near to the sofa, on which she had seated herself, and was beginning to talk to her. Wynyard was surprised to find that her shyness continued after the first few moments, when he had tried his very best to put her at ease with him, by talking of Saville Street, and making flattering allusions to Katherine Moore, and to that discussion in "Air Throne" to which he had been made welcome. He grew quite concerned at her downcast looks and her silence. He was always

very much at home with her himself, and had a tender, half-playful, half-affectionate regard for her, such as he might have had for a young sister, if fate had been so kind as to bestow such a treasure on him, a feeling full of repose and sweetness, without any of the excitement that Alma's presence brought. He thought he should very much like to make Emmie look up at him just now, and to comfort her if there was anything really amiss. It never occurred to him that the cause of her trouble could possibly react on him in any way, or be any concern of his.

"What is the matter?" he said at last, when there had been quite a moment's silence. "I don't think you listened to what I told you just now of my having met Casabianca in the street this morning, and I have a more important anecdote about him in store which I cannot possibly bring out unless you will look up and seem interested. Come, now, did we not make a bargain to tell each other of our grievances in this house? If you will begin, I will go on. Mine are quite serious, I assure you, and yours I am convinced cannot go beyond James's and Casabianca's silver tray, for I gathered from Miss Rivers, when I called last week, that the whole household is at your feet since you came to stay here. Won't you look up and tell me?"

He was not at all prepared for the real pain in Emmie's eyes when she did look up.

"That lady who left the room as you came in," she began, abruptly, "was Mrs. Kirkman. She has been sitting here talking to me for a long time."

"Well," he said, a little puzzled, "she is a very good-natured person, is she not? I met her the other night at a *conversazione*, and she did not frighten me. I was even a little relieved, I think, to find her so big. It gives a reason for the Brobdingnagian Palace they have built at Kensington Park Gate that reconciles one to it a little. She has not done anything very bad to you, I hope?"

"She gave me a kiss," said Emmie, her lip quivering so piteously as she spoke, that the words came out with difficulty, and she had to pause to bring them into order for something else that was to follow.

Wynyard felt tempted to laugh, for one second, the contrast between Emmie's extreme agitation and the cause assigned to it struck him as so comical. Then all at once his very heart stood still, for a thought came like a flash of lightning, warning him of a blow that he must call up all his courage to meet manfully.

"You have something else to tell me," he asked

slowly; "I should like to hear it at once if you don't mind."

"She said," Emmie went on, looking away and trying hard to empty her voice of significance; "she said she kissed me because we, she and I, were likely to be relations soon."

"And she meant——?"

"Her son and—and——"

"Miss Rivers! Well, I did not think it would be that; not anything quite so bad as that."

The words were spoken so quietly that Emmie looked up relieved for a moment, and then she could not remove her pitying, remorseful eyes from the face (always a mirror of feeling), which told a great deal too plainly of the stress of the blow she had dealt. It was dreadful to see the pain, the look of death upon it. She felt like a murderess, as if she had really plunged a dagger into a living heart, and was watching the life-blood flow. How was she to bring out the words to which this information was meant only to lead up! There was no use in speaking them just now; he could not take them in till this life and death struggle was over.

It really lasted only for a second or two under her eyes. The instant Wynyard recovered himself enough to know that she was looking at him, he sprang up and

moved away. Her soft, pitying gaze seemed to carry a sting of agony with it just then. In a minute or two, he thought, this live pain with which he was struggling for very existence, as it seemed, would be a dead one—dead with how much else of his very soul extinguished with it. He strolled to the piano where Alma had played to him on the evening when he had resolved to take up again the hope of winning her, and saw some music lying about with Horace Kirkman's name written on it in a bold hand. That sent him further away still to the window recess, where he stood for some minutes among the flowers, inhaling their strong perfume without knowing at the time what the impression on his senses was, although similar odours remained hateful to him to his dying day, and always brought back something of the horror of confusion and pain he suffered then. It was not the loss of Alma only that was such a blow to him. He had at least believed himself to be prepared for that, ever since the change in his worldly prospects had altered their relations to each other, though there had never been any taking back of old admissions of preference by Alma herself. He had often thought of losing all future right in her, but this way of losing seemed to involve a great deal more than the actual loss in the future. It was a shattering of all the thoughts of her that dated from the

first bright dawning of imaginative love in his boyhood, when she had summed up all perfection to him ; a making all the past as empty as it seemed the coming years were to be. Alma and Horace Kirkman ! He knew a little of Horace Kirkman ; not one bad thing that could be said to stamp him as unworthy, but just a number of very small things which to Wynyard's mind revealed the man's character plainly enough ; boastful speeches, little meannesses as the reverse side of ostentatious lavishness, a coarse word or two in an overheard conversation, showing, he thought, a nature that the Alma of his dreams would have shrunk from instinctively. How could his recollection of her stand out pure and clear by the side of this other utterly distasteful image ? Wynyard knew all the time that these were only first thoughts born of his own selfish pain : the pity for her, the longing to save her from what he knew would be misery in the end, the remorse for this first harsh judgment of her, the struggle to put her back in her supreme place, and worship the fallen idol as devoutly as ever, would all have to be gone through in their turn—long, long vistas of pain.

He was just rousing himself to the thought of where he was, and to the necessity of getting away from a place where he was liable at any moment to encounter Alma

herself, when he felt a timid touch on his arm, hardly a touch—it was more like the flutter of a little bird's wing hovering near, and looking round he saw Emmie standing by his side.

“I am going out of the room now,” she said. “I would have gone before, but—but—before I go, I want to tell you why I repeated Mrs. Kirkman's words to you just now. I thought you ought to know—because——”

“You were quite right,” said Wynyard, gently, “and I thank you for it.”

“Because,” continued Emmie, who could only go straight on, and felt she should be lost if the prepared words were to slip from her, “because, though Mrs. Kirkman and Aunt Rivers say it is to be so, as I told you, Alma herself speaks differently. It was one night when she and I were sitting together alone; but——” she paused, almost frightened at the change, the sudden, eager hopefulness that sprang into his face; “do you think I ought to repeat to you what Alma said to me alone?”

“You need not, thank you,” said Wynyard, recovering himself after a struggle that had prevented words. “I understand enough to thank you with all my heart for caring enough for me—for her—to say what you have

said; for giving me so much hope, and trusting me so far. It may not make any difference; I think now that I should have tried what remonstrance could do without it, but perhaps that is only because you have brought me back to life again. You said you were going, but I will go. I have intruded on you a great deal longer than I intended."

He had got to the door, leaving Emmie still standing among the flowers, when he turned suddenly and came back again. The colour had returned into his face, and the dawning of a smile was making it look itself again. "I want you to come away from among Mr. Kirkman's flowers," he said, "for I think there is something poisonous about them, and I'm sure you don't like them any better than I do. And there is another thing I want. I want you to promise me never to blame yourself for what you said to-day, for your kindness to me, whatever comes of it; you must not."

In the midst of his own pain it had occurred to him, with that instinctive reading of a woman's heart which only a very high-minded man is capable of, that she would perhaps recall that touch on his arm, those pitying looks she had given him, and when the excitement of the occasion was over, suffer pangs of wounded reserve and

pride on their account, and he wanted to save her from self-blame if he could.

"You must promise not to regret anything you have said this afternoon," he persisted.

"I will try," said Emmie, reading the kindness in his face, and feeling grateful, though her heart sank under it as beneath a weight.

Then he went, and she walked straight to the fire-place, and seated herself on the same low stool where Alma sat to read Agatha's letter on the evening of Constance's wedding-day. No idle tears, however, came to her to relieve her pain. She knew quite well that she had not time to cry. Aunt Rivers would ring her bell in a minute to summon her to give an account of Mrs. Kirkman's visit, and Emmie thought she had almost rather put out her eyes than let Aunt Rivers see them swollen with crying to-day. She pressed her fingers tightly over the dry aching balls, and set her will to the task of seizing, and, as it were, repressing within the old bounds this strange, new self that had to-day performed feats and spoken words she must not so much as think about again for a long, long time. To-morrow she should be at home, making tea for the boys at this hour in the little schoolroom, and having the prospect before her of discussing the weekly bills with Mary Ann in the course

of the evening. Surely she should be quite herself again under that pressure, and need never let thoughts of what had happened here rise up to trouble her. Emmie's short experience of life had already taught her more self-control than she was usually credited with by those who only observed the sympathetic expression of her face. The victory over her agitation was quickly won, and when the bell summoned her she was ready to take into her aunt's room a face in which Lady Rivers was not able to detect any disturbance.

"So," she said, when Emmie had answered all her questions, "Mr. Anstice has been calling here again, has he? It is strange how slow some people are in finding out where they are not welcome. He must have seen the Kirkmans' carriage at the door, and Mrs. Kirkman herself. I wonder what he thought about it! Well, he will have to know the truth sooner or later, and it had better not be till all is quite satisfactorily settled, for I would not have Alma's mind disturbed just now for worlds. I think I shall write to Mr. Anstice myself then, a nice sympathetic little note, for after all he was very useful to Frank, and behaved particularly well when poor dear Melville got into that unlucky scrape at Oxford. I don't forget all *that*; but if I let him have early news of the engagement, and write to him myself, I don't see that he

will have any right to consider himself ill used. He can't possibly be so selfish as to wish to stand between Alma and such a match as Horace Kirkman. He must surely see that he has nothing to offer comparable to that."

What Mrs. Kirkman, on her side, thought of Mr. Anstice she was at that moment expounding to her son, whom she had come across at the corner of a neighbouring square, and taken into the carriage during its transit across Hyde Park.

"Quite a high young man, and very handsome," she was saying. "I don't know how he comes to be calling so often at No. 17, but it strikes me that he looks very much at home in that house. He is not a relation of the Riverses, I know that, and though Miss Rivers and he were talking very intimately about old times and old friends one day when I came in, and found them together, I observed that she never called him anything but Mr. Anstice."

"Anstice," returned Horace, crossly. "I know the man, a barrister and scribbler in the papers, and those who know him best say that, clever as he is, he will never get very far, for he has a knack of always taking up the least workable side of every question. Christian socialism, temperance, I don't know what; notions that would drive my father wild, and cannot, I should think, go down

any better with Sir Francis. I don't understand your being so particularly taken with his looks, mother!"

"Well, there's a something—but mind, Horace, I don't mean 'airs' when I say 'high.' It's a something I've never been able to put my finger upon yet. Money won't give it, nor yet education, for you've had the very best of that, you know. It's done a great deal for you, and put you in a better place than your father and me, as far as society goes, though to be sure, you'll never be such a *man* as your father, but it has not given you quite the look and way with you that I've noticed in a few tip-top people, and though this Mr. Anstice mayn't have a penny to bless himself with, he's got *that*. I don't want to make you uneasy, Horace. I'm only telling you just what I see, and explaining why I think that if I were you I would try to get something settled in a certain quarter before very long. Your father hates a thing to be long in hand, and would like to see you engaged to-morrow, and married by the end of the month if it could be done, and we know well enough what Sir Francis' and Lady Rivers's wishes are. It's only the young lady herself."

"Only," cried Horace, turning away his head, and looking out of the window.

"Well, I never knew you backward in asking for anything you wanted before, my boy."

“Perhaps because I never wanted anything before so much as this,” returned the young man, to whom love was already giving more effective lessons in humility, the root of good manners, than his various teachers through a long and expensive education had been able to instil.

“Your father thought he was asking for a good deal when he came for me,” said Mrs. Kirkman, smiling, and putting a big hand on her son’s shoulder, “for I was his master’s daughter, and had plenty of suitors after me. Shall I tell you what I had been thinking for a good while before he spoke? There now—that he was not quite the man I had taken him for at first, or he would not have waited so long. He found me ready enough, and though as I said before, you arn’t your father, you’re his son, and Kirkmans have generally got what they really set their minds upon, ever since I have known anything of the family. Miss Rivers left word that she should not fail to be home in time to go with us to the Botanical Gardens to-morrow afternoon, and you have only to give me a look or a squeeze of the foot at any minute, and I will manage to keep out of the way.”

“I shan’t give you a look or a squeeze of the foot you may be satisfied, mother,” said Horace. “I could not do it to command in that fashion; and yet, perhaps, you are

right about the time, and I wish with all my heart that it were well over. But here we are at Kensington Park Gate, and there is my father's brougham at the door before us."

This conversation was one of the consequences that resulted from Emmie's hour in the drawing-room at Eccleston Square. A second result came to Alma in the form of a letter by the eight o'clock evening post on the following day, when Emmie was making tea for the children in the back sitting-room at home, and wondering, while she listened to the latest anecdotes and most recent Saville Street witticisms as retailed by Mildie and Casabianca, why her fortnight's absence should have stretched such a gulf between her and these once absorbing topics. When the note was brought to her, Alma was alone in the drawing-room, waiting till she could make up her mind to go to her mother's room, where she was due, and make an announcement to her which it was doubtless also her mother's due to hear, before the event that had to be communicated was another hour old. Alma was trying to make herself believe that she looked forward to the caresses and praises which might be expected to follow her news. She ought to be glad to know that in a minute or two more she would bring so much satisfaction, such happiness to her mother; she ought not to shrink from

the triumphant jubilee there would be made over her ; it was the reward she had to look to, and reasonably she should be in a hurry to taste it. Just then the letter was brought to her and she took it and held it in her hand, looking at it by the fire-light, stupidly as one does look at a well-known handwriting that one has not seen for a long time. How familiar it was, and how strange ! Dreading what there might be inside the letter, Alma gave herself five minutes in which to recall the pictures that the look of those characters on the envelope brought back to her. Her schoolroom exercise books, when she was thirteen and fourteen, which had had many pages in a handwriting only a little less formed than that ; pages scribbled off in some great press of schoolroom business, to secure her being able to join some boating or nutting excursion for which the others had gone off to prepare without thinking of her troubles. How exhilarating the run down to the river, hand in hand, used to be when the task was done ! How happy one dared be without thinking of consequences in those days. And again the letters that had come day by day, when Frank had been taken ill with small-pox abroad, and only one member of the reading party to which he belonged had dared to stay in the infected spot to nurse him, and write the bulletins

that had brought at first such dismay and then relief and thankfulness. Alma remembered the position on the pages of these letters where sentences had occurred which had first made her know that she was in the writer's mind while he penned them, that he was thinking of her anxiety more than of any other person's, that it was to herself rather than to Frank the devotion was paid. Yes, and it was a look she had seen on her mother's face, while reading one of the letters, that had confirmed her own impression, and permitted her to carry it as a treasure in her heart through all those anxious days. With this recollection, Alma did what she knew she must never do again—scarcely remember henceforth from this evening; she lifted the envelope to her face and laid her lips on the writing for an instant. It was a good-bye—only that—a good-bye to the poetry, to the romance of her life. Henceforth there would be solid substance for her—plenty of that. Was not Moloch the god of riches, and did not people in old times drop their children through his outstretched brazen hands into the consuming fire beneath, that was his heart? Was it so much to drop one's fancies, one's aspirations, the first flower-like feelings of one's heart through those hands to be burnt up? Surely they would burn without more wailing and demon-

stration of grief than the trumpets and shawms playing in the Valley of Tophet would drown! Alma broke open the seal of the letter and read:

“MY DEAR ALMA,

“I shall address you in the old style once more, whether I have a right to do so or not; for it is only while recalling old privileges, old unrevoked admissions of yours, that I feel I have any claim to speak as I am going to speak now. Of course a word from you would silence me for ever, but I recollect that I have never had that word. Your mother made me understand some time ago that the change in my worldly prospects after my uncle’s death must be held to put an end to the hopes she well knew I had long cherished, and not without her sanction, respecting yourself. She was very angry, and I was very much astonished, for I did not know before that it was the supposed heir of my uncle’s money, and not Wynyard Anstice, who was welcomed to your home. I tried hard to nourish resentment, and to believe it could kill love, but you delivered me from that delusion on the evening we talked together over Agatha’s profession, and you once more condescended to let me see *yourself* as you are, when the world lets you alone. Since then I have permitted myself to hope

again, and this is my hope—that you will let your heart speak to you apart from other considerations and fears. I am the same as I was in the days when you looked kindly on me, when you let me see the dawn of what I believed was to be the crown and glory of my life—your preference for me. I love you as much more now than then, as a man who has struggled and suffered something can love, more than a boy who is beginning to love, and the love of then and now is one unbroken undying growth. I have proved to myself, and can prove to your father and you, that as far as considerations of prudence go, I am fit to be trusted with the care of your future. I cannot, it is true, now offer you the riches you might have elsewhere, but besides the love, of which I shall not trust myself to speak much at present, I can promise you something more than the proverbial dinner of herbs. I do not think it likely that I shall ever make a great fortune, but I have health and resolution and aptitude for my own sort of work, and I have been successful in a moderate way so far. I have confidence in your father that he would not oppose your wishes if only they were heartily enlisted on my side. Question them, dearest Alma, straitly to-night. I am not pleading selfishly. I would not, or at least I think I would not, have you if you could be—I don't say more prosperous—but happier,

more blessed with anyone else, only I don't believe there breathes a man who could love you as I could. With that tremendous boast I must end. In spite of it, Heaven knows, I am humble enough, fearful enough, and as well aware as I can be of what it is I am asking you to do. If your heart stirs towards me, if it is only a little, give it time to speak. I will wait indefinitely, for I fear nothing so much as a hasty verdict.

"Yours, as I have always been since I first knew you,

"WYNYARD ANSTICE."

Nearly an hour passed after Alma finished reading, before she betook herself to her mother's room, and as it was then past nine o'clock, she found Lady Rivers in a very plaintive state on the score of having been left to her own company for such a length of time.

"I have been coughing all the evening, and I have wanted my drops since Ward left me," she began, directly Alma entered. "I miss poor little Emmie West sadly, and I did think you would have made a point of coming to sit with me and read me to sleep on the first evening of my being alone, especially as, so far as I can make out, there has been nothing to keep you downstairs. Ward said that a letter had been taken in to you, but you left

the Kirkmans only just before you dressed for dinner, so it cannot have been anything of importance!"

"The letter was nothing you would care to hear about, mamma," answered Alma. "But let me sit down near you on the bed, dear mother. I am sorry that your cough has been troublesome, and that I was not here to give you your drops when Ward went down to her supper, especially as I have something to tell you now that we are alone."

"My darling Alma!" cried Lady Rivers, stretching out her arms.

"Yes, mamma," said Alma, without however bending her head an inch from the stately height at which she held it. "It is that—Mr. Horace Kirkman spoke to me this afternoon while we were walking in the gardens and——"

"Alma, be quick, child! What is the matter? You accepted him, of course."

"I did not refuse him, mother. Yes, I suppose it was a virtual acceptance; they are sure to interpret it so; but I asked that we might have a little more time to know each other before my acceptance was considered quite final and made known beyond our two families. I felt this to be fair to him, mother, as well as to myself. When he understands the nature of my feelings a little

better, he may not be satisfied, and if I am to sell myself, at all events I should like it to be an honest bargain."

"Alma, do you want to kill me by saying such unkind things, just when we ought to be so happy and thankful? Sold, what can you mean! Horace Kirkman is sincerely attached to you, in fact, absolutely devoted to you. However rich he had been I should not, you know, have wished you to marry one who was not that."

"I believe he is that, mamma."

"And your father thinks well of him, and he is enormously rich, one of the best matches in England just now. Lady Amhurst told Constance only last week that Horace Kirkman might have chosen his wife from almost any of the noble families in England, where there are many daughters."

"I wonder he did not."

"He fell in love with you, Alma, directly he was introduced to you, and will not hear of marrying anyone else. Mrs. Kirkman told me this so long ago as when we went to Golden Mount for Christmas. Oh, Alma, you ought to think yourself a lucky girl—you ought to be thankful!"

"Let us begin then, mamma," said Alma; "let us be very happy about it. I reckoned a great deal on satisfying you."

"But the delay, the risk—I don't like that part. Why could you not have put an end to all anxiety by accepting him outright to-day? It would only have been what the Kirkmans consider his due, and you would have been in a better position with the old people than you will ever be after this hesitation. I too should have been at rest, and could have got well then."

"I did what I could, mamma," said Alma, the tears rising in her eyes. "You must not press me any further; indeed I thought of you, and hoped you would be happy."

Lady Rivers stretched out her arms again, and again took them back empty.

"You talk of my being happy," she said, plaintively, "but it is my children's happiness I want after all—nothing but that—and I can't help having my own views about what will be best for them, Alma, when I have such an example of the miseries of poverty before my eyes for ever, as your poor Aunt West shows us all. It may have made me over anxious, a little pressing, perhaps, but you ought not to resent it; you should consider how natural it is that I should dread the same wretchedness for my own children that I see in my poor sister. If you, Alma, were to come down to letting lodgings, I should turn in my grave, I think, if I had been dead twenty years."

"You will bring the cough back, I am afraid, mamma," said Alma, "if you talk so excitedly. I had better read a few verses to you, as Emmie used to do, to compose you, and then I will say good-night, leaving the rest of our talk till to-morrow morning when we shall both be calmer."

Alma hurriedly took up the first book that came to hand as she spoke, a Bible from which Emmie West, continuing home habits, had been used to read a chapter or a Psalm to her aunt before leaving for the night; she opened it hap-hazard, meaning to read the first sentence or two on which her eye fell. "And the rich man lifted up his eyes being in torments, and saw Lazarus afar off." Alma turned the page quickly. She must not read *that* as a sedative to her mother's dread of *post-mortem* anxiety. To put her in mind that things might look so differently in her grave as to make poverty no longer the supreme terror, would hardly conduce to her sleep just now. Apparently Emmie West had greater skill in finding composing passages than Alma, for somehow as she turned page after page in search of a calming sentence, she thought that the whole book was written through and through with warnings and exhortations against worldliness and the love of riches; such warnings as would be a mere blow in the face when spoken by her

lips to her mother that night. After five minutes' search she laid the book down in despair.

"After all I think I had better ring for Ward to come and read you to sleep," she said; "she is not a good reader, but you say the sound of her voice makes you drowsy, and I am sure the sooner you sleep and the less you think to-night the better it will be for you." Then Alma got up from the bed, and after ringing the bell wished her mother good-night and left the room.

"Without one kiss to her mother on the day when she had engaged herself to be married," Lady Rivers reflected bitterly, chewing the cud of sad thoughts as she lay waiting for Ward, who was enjoying a cheerful gossip with James downstairs over the symptoms of coming change, death, and marriage, in the household. She lay regretting Emmie West, and recalling little anecdotes that had come out in Emmie's talks about her home, which suggested a very different state of things between her and her mother. Lady Rivers could not possibly be capable of envying a person who let lodgings, and yet, all through a sleepless night when she tried to comfort herself by picturing the splendours of Alma's marriage, her thoughts perpetually strayed away from the fascinating theme to wonder how Emmie would look and

speak, and what sort of fondling and caressing there would be between the mother and the daughter, when she came to tell poor sister West of some marriage engagement that certainly would not, like Alma's, claim a sentence to itself in all the morning papers.

CHAPTER III.

CASABIANCA'S POLITICS.

Love, strong as Death, is dead.
Come, let us make his bed
Among the dying flowers :
A green turf at his head ;
And a stone at his feet,
Whereon we may sit
In the quiet evening hours.

"It's enough to make one wish one was a downright Jebusite," said Casabianca, thrusting a poker which he had been moodily balancing on his forefinger into the cindery back-room fire, and causing a cloud of dust to fly over Mildie, seated opposite, with a Euclid open in her lap, on to which, under cover of the twilight and Casabianca's late reverie, a few tears had been silently dropping.

"No, you need not set me right, Mildie, I won't be set right by you. I believe if you were dead, and some one made a mistake in history over your coffin, you would jump up and set 'em right. What does the name

signify? I know what I mean; those fellows in the French revolution, who wanted to blow everybody's brains out, and kick things to shivers—and I say that the way in which we are all being treated just now is enough to make a fellow wish to join 'em. It's an awful shame."

"I don't know, Casa," said Mildie, with a great sob in her voice. "I suppose it will be for your good in the end, and perhaps Emmie will enjoy herself when she gets away from Saville Street, and can improve her French, and visit places one reads about. I would go away with a worse person than Aunt Rivers even," said Mildie, savagely, "to see the town where the Chevalier Bayard is buried. Oh, Emmie will enjoy herself, and Katherine Moore says we ought not to make a trouble of it."

"Hang Katherine Moore!" exploded Casabianca; "it's beastly ungrateful of her to say any such thing. I should like to know who has brought up their second scuttle of coals all this winter, while Mary Ann has been saying that one scuttle a day was enough for attic lodgers, and who's doing it is that Christabel's flowers ever get watered? And then for them to take and say I'm not to make a trouble of being sent out of the house to wear petticoats and yellow stockings, and never have a hat on my head! It's enough to turn a fellow into a

flat Jebusite, as I said before; and all that Miss Alma Rivers may marry a money-grubbing Kirkman, and live in the 'Tower of Babel.' You need not shout at me. I know I'm right about *that* name at least. That is what Mr. Kirkman's new big house is called. Uncle Rivers showed it me in *Punch*, when I went to Eccleston Square with mamma the other morning."

"It was not the name I was trying to stop you from saying," answered Mildie. "I don't care what people call Mr. Kirkman's house; it's nothing to us; but Emmie asked me not to say, or let anyone else say, she was going abroad with Aunt Rivers instead of Alma, because Alma was engaged to Mr. Horace Kirkman. It may not be quite settled yet, Emmie thinks, and it ought not to be talked about. If it is such a disgrace to the family, we need not be in a hurry to spread it about."

"Rubbish!" cried Casabianca. "When a fellow has heard a thing with his own ears, where's the use of trying to make him believe he does not know it? I tell you I heard every word Aunt Rivers said to mother. They left me kicking about in a dressing-room, with nothing to do for an hour but listen to the talk that went on in the bedroom beyond; Aunt Rivers coughing half the time to work mother up to pity her, and do as she wished. Did I not feel as if I were being regularly sold,

tied up in a sack and delivered over, as the bargaining went on? Such a pleasant change for dearest Emmie! The making of dear little Aubrey! Faugh! And then Uncle Rivers comes out, staring as if he expected to see a fellow six feet high, and puts his hand on my head and says they intend to make a Grecian of me. Grecian, indeed! I always thought the Greeks were fools for speaking such a miserable language, and inventing mathematics, but I did not know before that they made quite such guys of themselves as to go about in yellow stockings and petticoats, and without any hats."

"And you really," said Mildie, sighing, "care about that; and you are not at all glad to be going to a place where you can learn as much as you like, and where you might, if you pleased, get to be a great man. Coleridge and Charles Lamb were brought up where you are going."

"Yes, I know all about 'em, Christabel's been reading it to me out of a book. They had to eat at dinner lumps of boiled beef fat called squabs! Sounds jolly, I think!"

"It's a very unfair world, *I* think," said Mildred, while a great tear fell and blistered a page of her Euclid. "Some people get what they don't want and can't make any use of, and other people who are starving for that same thing have to go without."

"Shut up there," cried Casabianca; "I thought sisters were made to be sympathetic with one and all that, but you—it makes me more disgusted than anything, to see you sitting there crying, because you are never to go to school again, and never need look into a book unless you please. Don't I wish I were standing in your shoes."

"Would you really like to change places with me?" cried Mildie, a wild notion of personating Casabianca in petticoats and yellow stockings, and profiting by Uncle Rivers's presentation to Christ's Hospital in his stead, shooting momentarily through her brain.

"There," said Casabianca, "that just proves what I'm always pointing out to you—the folly of you girls supposing, because you can do sums, and remember a date or two, that you have the same sort of sense that *we* have, or that you know anything of a man's life. You think, do you, that you could get on better at a public-school than I could, because you're bookish? As if that would help you in a boxing-match. A jolly fix you would find yourself in before a week was out, if I took you at your word."

"I know it's impossible, of course," said Mildie, despairingly. "And, Casa, I don't mean to be unsympathising. I'm sorry enough that you are going away."

"Well you may be," growled Casabianca, resolved not to be mollified too easily. "You'll all feel the miss of me when the Gentle Lamb flies into a temper, and there's no one to stand up to him. All your precious history and mathematics won't help you to manage *him*."

"I know it," said Mildie. "But that's just why it seems so hard that I am to be taken from things I care for, and set to make a muddle of other people's work. Aunt Rivers told mamma that I was old enough now to be as useful in the family as Emmie, and that I ought to begin, as if just saying that could turn me into Emmie."

"But you think a great deal of yourself, don't you?" said Casabianca, aghast at this sudden appearance of self-depreciation in Mildie.

"No, I don't!—I can't help liking arithmetic and remembering dates and things; but, oh, you need not, all of you, think so badly of me because of that; if I could make myself as pretty as Emmie, and get people to like me as they do her; but, there," dashing her head down upon her Euclid, and making it a mere puddle of tears, "I know they never will. I know how it will be when you and Emmie are gone. The Gentle Lamb will always be making horrible grimaces on the stairs, while Mrs. Urquhart is passing, and I shall not be able to stop

him, and the keys will always be missing at tea-time, and I shall never know where to look for the sal volatile when mamma has a headache."

"And all because the Rivers's are so selfish," grunted Casabianca. "They have everything they can possibly want, and yet they rob us of Emmie. I know what it is like."

"So do I," said Mildie, "and I wish there was a prophet now, to go to Aunt Rivers and say, 'Thou art the man!' I should like to do it myself."

"Perhaps she'll be awfully punished by-and-by, then," said Casabianca, a good deal cheered by the suggestion; "so, if I were you, Mildie, I would cheer up a bit. You really ain't so bad when you don't set up to know more than other people, and now I'll tell you something that you never should have known if you had not come down from your high horse. Tom Winter has been mistaking you for Emmie this long time."

"How could he?" asked Mildie, not so overwhelmed by the compliment as might have been expected.

"He is my greatest friend this half, and I told him how jolly Emmie was, and that he might look at her at church, if he liked, and the other day I found out that he had been looking at you, and taking you for the

pretty one. He says he don't see any reason why he should not. There now."

"I don't care what Tom Winter thinks of me," said Mildie, with dignity; "but if you will like me as Harry likes Emmie, I will do everything I can for you till you go, and always in the holidays, you shall see."

"All right," said Casabianca, edging his chair a little closer to Mildie's. "I never did bully you but for your own good, to keep you from thrusting your learning down everybody's throat, and now as you are reasonable I'll let you into something more. See my purse. You may well stare at what is in it; but Mr. Anstice tipped me tremendously the day he called when everybody was out, and when I walked back to his place with him. He said it was to buy a bat, but I shall get a great deal more out of it than that, I promise you, if only I can make up my mind to change the first 'yellow-boy' I ever had in my life. Don't it look jolly?"

"Mr. Anstice!" exclaimed Mildie. "He called an hour ago with a book for Emmie, and left word that he would not come in, as it was her last day at home. I wondered how he had got to know she was going away. I suppose you told him that and everything—eh, Casabianca?"

"Why not? If Aunt Rivers thinks she can bribe

me to keep hers and Miss Alma's secrets she's very much mistaken. Of course I told him everything."

"How did he look?" inquired Mildie, curiously.

"Look!" said Casabianca, "how should he look, but just as he always does, though now I come to think of it, I don't believe he did. He was not so jolly as usual. When he first came in he looked—well, palish, you know, as if he had a bad cold in his head or something. However, he was all right with me, and evidently very glad to have me to talk to, for he invited me to dine with him, and gave me this magnificent tip when I went away."

"Perhaps I had better take the book and his note to Emmie now. She is packing her new box in the spare room, and she is to drink tea this last night in the Land of Beulah. I will find her before she goes up."

It had all come about in what seemed such an amazingly short space of time, so many events and propositions following each other, that Emmie, the person chiefly concerned, had hardly yet taken in all that was involved in them. On the day after Emmie's return home, Dr. Urquhart had been sent for to Eccleston Square in haste, and brought back alarming news of Lady Rivers, who had been seized with an attack of hæmorrhage from the lungs after an agitating conversation with her daughter. Some days of real anxiety

followed, and then, as amendment set in, the necessity of Lady Rivers leaving England and spending some months in a warmer climate began to be talked of. Next came the day when Mrs. West was summoned to a conference with Sir Francis Rivers in Eccleston Square, from which she returned pale and agitated, saying that Sir Francis had almost put her sister's life into her hands by assuring her that Lady Rivers would only consent to leave home on condition that her niece Emmie was allowed to accompany her, while Alma remained to complete her London season under her sister's chaperonage. Aubrey's nomination to Christ's Hospital had not, in reality, been offered as a bribe, for Sir Francis had previously been working to obtain it; but success came at the moment when he made his request for the loan of Emmie, and Mr. West chose to feel that it laid an obligation upon the whole family from which they could not escape. When the matter was put before him he said he would not accept Sir Francis's favours without paying the equivalent prescribed; and, hearing this, Emmie and her mother exchanged glances, and knew in their hearts that the thing was settled and nothing left for either of them to say. An education for one of the boys must not be refused or imperilled by any crossing of Mr. West's mood.

Sir Francis was liberal beyond expectation in all the arrangements that followed, and everybody told Mrs. West and Emmie that this price they were paying for Aubrey's advantage was no sacrifice, but a great piece of good luck. They were too busy to investigate their own impressions on the subject closely, and said very little to each other about the approaching separation even during the last day's packing. They talked, as loving people on the eve of a parting do talk, of trifles which concerned the common life, tenderly making believe that absence would not snap the close threads of union. They made over Casabianca's new shirts to the last button, and laid little plans for brightening Harry's evenings and consoling Mildie for the loss of her school lessons. Then, when Emmie was laying her new dress on the top of her box and nothing further remained to be done, Mrs. West spoke a few tender words of counsel, and love, and sorrow, taking care all the while that the slow tears creeping down her cheeks should not fall on the pretty frills and flounces Emmie's fingers were smoothing out, and they kissed across the box and clung mutely together over this symbol of parting, till Mr. West's evening knock was heard at the door. It brought a pang to Emmie with the thought of how far she would be away when it came on the next evening, and it sent Mrs. West

away in haste, to be at her post when her husband came in. He would not say anything to-night about Emmie's approaching departure, but perhaps (so Mrs. West thought) he would grieve over it more than anyone else in the house, for did not the worst part of every trouble come upon him, and ought not he to be supremely pitied by her at least ?

Emmie sat down on the floor after her mother left her, to wipe away her tears and get herself ready for the Land of Beulah. Tears had been very near her eyes all day, yet it cannot be denied that the grey web of her regrets was crossed by a great many bright threads of hope and expectation. The mere fact of being seated here to-night, with a fire lighted in the spare room expressly for her, and an air of excitement pervading the whole house on her account, caused some pleasant stirrings of emotions. Beyond lay thoughts and hopes, and eager glances into the future, which during the press of late occupations she had kept at bay. She now confessed to herself that after the interest of that one fortnight spent at the Rivers's she should have found it difficult to sink back altogether into Saville Street life, and never to know the end and real meaning of some events she had there taken part in. Now she should at all events be in the way of hearing, and might perhaps get to understand the drift of

Eccleston Square politics in the end. Could Casabianca's ears have served him rightly? Could Alma have decided so, and what influence had her own presumptuous meddling had on her decision?

Here instead of thoughts came visions, and Emmie was back in Eccleston Square, looking down over the balusters on a nodding bird-of-paradise feather and on the upturned face of a young man following behind. She could read clearly the character revealed in those keen, inquisitive eyes, that large, smiling, self-sufficient mouth, those boastful open nostrils, and that square chin, and she knew quite well, if Alma did not, the little there was to like in it, and the much to shrink from instinctively; and as she mentally gazed the wonder grew. How could Alma choose so? Would there ever be an end of her wondering, even while she kept her memory clear from the picture of another face which she could never bear, even in thought, to put by the side of that one, the idea of their being rivals giving her always a glow of indignation hard to keep within reasonable bounds? But what, after all, was Alma's choice to her, and what possible right had she to be angry about it, or to grieve for the pain it must have brought someone who would perhaps lay a part of the blame to her officiousness?

Just as Emmie's thoughts reached this point, Mildie

opened the bedroom door, bringing in a stream of gas-light from the passage, and something in her hand, which Emmie discovered to be a letter when her dreaming eyes recovered their power of seeing, and she had brought herself back to Saville Street again.

"Are you not dressed yet?" cried Mildie. "The tea has gone into the Land of Beulah already, and Dr. Urquhart came in half an hour ago. Here's a letter and a parcel for you, which Mr. Anstice left at the door. I did not think it worth while to bring them up whilst you were busy packing."

"Fetch me a candle then, please," said Emmie, "and I will dress here, without going upstairs again."

But Emmie did not wait for the candle to open her letter: as soon as Mildie was safely out of the room she coaxed up a blaze from the red embers, tore open the envelope, and read:

"DEAR MISS WEST,

"I called in Saville Street two days ago, in the hope of seeing you, and—shall I confess it?—of hearing from you the truth of a report that had reached me of serious illness in your uncle's house. I thought the illness might account for my not having received an answer to a letter sent there more than a week

ago, and I trusted to your kindness to throw all the light on my suspense your superior knowledge could give. Judge of my disappointment at not finding you. In default of his elders, Casabianca entertained me with an exposition of his views on things in general, among which I picked up, not what I wanted to hear certainly, but at all events the end of my suspense. There is simply no more to be said, and I am egotistical once more to you because I think, having gone so far in self-betrayal, it is better to make an end, and to assure you, once for all, that the failure of the enterprise you put me upon in no way detracts from my gratitude to you for holding me worthy of it. Let us both forget that we ever took upon ourselves to judge Mr. Horace Kirkman, junior, and try to believe a certain person's discernment greater than ours. May your cousin be happy in the choice she has made, and may you suffer as little from Mrs. Kirkman's vicarious affection as circumstances will admit of. I should like to have seen you before you left England, but I must not monopolise your time at home, now so short—the more as I am not without hope of seeing something of you during your banishment. The house to which, as I hear from your brother, you are going, belongs to a relative of mine, and it must have been my talk in old times of the charms and advantages

of La Roquette that induced Lady Rivers to fix upon it as a winter residence for herself and you. My cousin, Madame de Florimel, lives in a tumble-down old *château* at the foot of the hill on which the *châlet* you will inhabit is perched, and the visit she expects from me once in two years or so is about due now. Perhaps I shall escape there from this region of Kirkmans and east-windy thoughts, should they become too oppressive when Easter arrives, and we shall meet at La Roquette and talk London gossip among the anemones and daffodils, which by that time will have overrun all the valleys, where you will be quite at home when I see you next. Did you not say, when we were capping verses at Christmas, and Miss Moore could not understand your not being ready with a line for 'daffodils,' that you did not know Wordsworth well because you had never had him of your own? Here he is in a small enough compass to fit into a chance corner of your travelling-box, and I bring him in case you should find room for him at the last.

"Your sincere Friend,

"WYNARD ANSTICE."

"What does he say, Emmie? What is the letter about?" asked Mildie, who, candle flaming in hand, stood staring down into Emmie's face, as she reached the

last line. "Why, I do believe there's a tear on your cheek. Dear Emmie, you will let me read the letter, won't you? I do so want to know the sort of things people write when they are crossed in love and very miserable. Does he threaten to die and come to Alma's wedding-breakfast like Alonzo the Brave, with worms creeping out of his eyes? I'm sure I wish he would, and that you and I might be there as bridesmaids, and see the Rivers's and Kirkmans properly served out at last. You will let me read some part of the letter at all events, won't you?"

Emmie had it safe back in its envelope by this time.

"Mr. Anstice writes to me about La Roquette, the place in France where we are going," she answered with dignity. "He has French relations, and one of them lives in an old *château* there, close to the house Uncle Rivers has taken for us to stay in."

"A *château*," sighed Mildie. "How much happier most people are than ourselves; if I had a relation living in a real old *château*, I should not mind what happened to me—no, not if I were crossed in love fifty times. Dear Emmie, since you won't give me Mr. Anstice's letter to read, let me at least put his book into your box, and finish off the ends of the packing, while you go and

enjoy yourself in the Land of Beulah. To-morrow at this time I shall not have even such pleasant occupation as packing; I shall be making tea for the boys in the back parlour, without you, completely miserable."

CHAPTER IV.

“ HUSH.”

Think not thou canst sigh a sigh,
And thy Maker is not by :
Think not thou canst weep a tear,
And thy Maker is not near.

Oh ! He gives to us His joy,
That our grief He may destroy :
Till our grief is fled and gone
He doth sit by us and moan.

To enter Mrs. Urquhart's apartments from any other part of the house was to pass from noise and excitement to peace and sunshine, and Emmie felt a hush fall on her spirit the instant she crossed the threshold. Not that she was altogether wrong in supposing that the general agitation had for once just touched the still atmosphere of the Land of Beulah, and brought something new into the faces and manner of the friends who welcomed her there, but it was a soothing something, that flattered her with a sense of importance without saddening her. The fire was coaxed into such clear burning as only skill like Mrs. Urquhart's could coax a London fire. The tea-

service of dainty china and bright silver sparkled with cleanliness, not due certainly to manipulations of Mary Ann's, and the faces round the table reflected the brightness. Dr. Urquhart might, indeed, be a little pre-occupied, for once or twice, when Emmie suddenly turned towards him, she found, to her surprise, that he was gazing rather intently on her. Could he be noticing the red rims round her eyes, and did he know what caused them? Emmie looked away into the depths of the fire, and tried to comfort herself with the reflection that the most skilful of physicians, though he might spy out quickly the tokens of tears, could not penetrate to the cause from which the tears sprang. Mrs. Urquhart was luckily less observant than her son. She chatted on through the silence of the two others, about the laudatory notice of Graham's lectures she had just spied out in the "Lancet," and by-and-by, Dr. Urquhart woke up and joined in the conversation after his usual manner, with a good deal of playful banter of his mother, and then a question or remark, which tended to draw the talk away from personal matters, and give Emmie a chance of taking her share.

She did not avail herself of it frequently, such a bewildering clatter of voices seemed to be going on in her mind, all telling her different things about to-morrow,

and all, as it seemed to her, trying to drown a persistent small voice, that somewhere in a far corner of her brain would go on saying softly over and over again—"Among the anemones and daffodils in the spring"—"Among the anemones and daffodils in the spring." This was February, and even in England daffodils "take the winds of March." Emmie knew enough of Shakespeare to remember that. A month—six weeks—to wait, and then—— no, she would not make that calculation again; her mother was crying downstairs over a different scale of reckoning the weeks. How could she be so heartless as to feel as if the arrival of one London acquaintance at La Roquette would annul the pain of separation from everyone at home? She determined to put the notion from her and attend to what Dr. and Mrs. Urquhart were saying. They had travelled to the South of France in their talk now, and were congratulating her on all the new sights and sounds she would experience—nightingales, fireflies, cicadas.

Tea is over, and Mrs. Urquhart looks a shade surprised, when Dr. Urquhart lingers on, leaving a pile of notes unexamined on his writing-table, while he takes botanical dictionaries, volumes of natural history, from his shelves, to show Emmie engravings of flowers and insects she will soon have an opportunity of admiring in

their natural state. How delightedly Mildie would have picked up the information that drops from his lips, quite unpremeditatedly, and only because there is such a store within that it must come out when not suppressed, and how difficult it is to Emmie to care just then as much about the migratory caterpillar and the edible green frog as she knows she ought to care. He perceives the lack of interest at last, and subsides, with a sigh, into the inner-room to his writing-table and letters and reading-lamp. There, partially hidden by the curtains that hang from the arch between the rooms, he can still hear the murmur of voices by the hearth. He leans back in his chair every now and then between reading and answering a note, perhaps to cogitate his reply, perhaps to get a peep at the talkers, and think, as he watches the changes on Emmie's face, that his mother has found something to say to her which interests her more than the green frog. When he has come to his last note, he indulges himself in a longer spell of watching. Mrs. Urquhart has laid down her particoloured knitting, and has folded one of Emmie's little hands in hers.

"Yes, my dear," she is saying, "a *first* visit from home is an important crisis to a girl. Dear me, nothing else in after life is ever quite like it. It may be—it is likely to be—the beginning of all her real life. Perhaps

I'm a silly old woman, who expects every girl she sees to have the same experience as herself, but talking of this journey of yours somehow sets me upon recollecting the first time I ever left my home. I had led a quieter life than even you, my dear, in a little Scotch manse in the North, where we never saw a fresh face from year's end to year's end, and my first visit was made to cousins who lived in Edinburgh. What a packing up it was! How my mother stitched at my clothes, and what a prayer my good father made over me at family worship the last evening. The whole village was stirred up, and there was quite a little crowd to see me set off by the coach in the morning. Our laird, who made the journey the same day, and had promised to look after me, sneered a little at all the tears and excitement, telling me I should be back in a few weeks, feeling just the same as before I went, and that I should wonder then what all the commotion had been about. He was mistaken, however. I did return home at the end of a six weeks' visit; but Dr. Urquhart, my Dr. Urquhart, not the imitation one you see there, followed me to the manse before the week was out, and well, my dear, the old quiet home-life was over for me after that. Plenty of struggle and trouble came after, but I don't think I ever for one moment of the struggling time wished that I had not travelled to

Edinburgh that particular winter. Things of the kind will occur, I suppose, when a girl goes out into the world from a quiet home; there is always a chance that it is her fate she goes to meet, and I can only say I hope your luck will be as good as mine, if you chance to come across yours before we sit here again, Emmie, my dear."

"Mother! what are you talking about,—hush!"

The two heads, confidentially approaching each other, turned in surprise towards the direction whence the words came,—Dr. Urquhart was standing in the opening between the rooms, looking very much shaken out of his ordinary composure: there was an actual flash of anger in his eyes, and his fresh healthy cheeks were a great many shades redder than usual. Mrs. Urquhart gazed at him silently for a minute over her spectacles. She had not been silenced in such a peremptory tone since the date of her Edinburgh journey.

"My dear Graham," she said at last, "why should I be silent? What business is it of yours what I say to Miss West? We thought you were too much occupied with your letters to heed what nonsense we women please to talk to each other."

Dr. Urquhart had now reached the fireplace, and was facing his mother, with the gleam of displeasure still in his grey eyes.

"It is my business," he said, in a low tone. "I cannot hear you suggesting to Miss West the possibility of coming back changed to her old friends without putting in a word of remonstrance. I wonder at you, mother."

"But why should you care?" cried Emmie, turning innocent wide-open eyes upon him. "Of course it was only nonsense we were talking. I don't want any change. Nothing will happen to me. I shall come back just the same—liking and disliking the same people that I like and dislike now. You will see."

"Shall I?—That is enough," said Dr. Urquhart, turning from his mother to Emmie, with all the anger cleared away from his face, and a strange happy trembling of the lip, and twinkling of the eyes, noticeable there instead.

Mrs. Urquhart cleared her throat very loudly, and began ostentatiously to count the stitches of her knitting.

"It is just folly to pretend to prophesy how you will feel when you come back, before you have ever gone away," she said, severely, when she had come to the end of a row.

"I was not prophesying, was I?" asked Emmie, a little taken aback at the impression her common-place remark had evidently made on her two auditors. "I don't think I meant to prophesy anything."

"No, no!" said Dr. Urquhart in a hurried voice, through which a timid joyfulness pierced. "It was, if I may be allowed to say so, more of a promise than a prophecy; it is a question of present feeling—of knowing our own minds."

"Which you young things always fancy you do when you don't," said Mrs. Urquhart, beginning diligently to count again.

Emmie's cheeks burned uncomfortably, as she sat in a silence that followed, wondering what she could have said or done amiss, and when the clock in the back room opportunely broke the stillness, by striking nine, she jumped up much relieved, and pleaded the early start to-morrow morning, and the number of little last things that remained to be done, in excuse for an early leaving. She fancied that Mrs. Urquhart's farewell kiss was somewhat less cordial than her welcoming one had been, and that Dr. Urquhart tried to make up for his mother's unwonted coldness by following her to the door, and holding her hand in a long farewell shake, while he promised to look after her mother's health until her return. When once the door of the Land of Beulah was shut behind her, however, she had too many other things to think of, to trouble herself further about any strangeness there might have been in the manners of her two friends that

night. She would have been extremely surprised, if she had known how nearly the Land of Beulah ceased to be the Land of Beulah, on her account, after she left it.

Dr. Urquhart walked straight to his own end of the room, when he had taken leave of Emmie, and as he stood by his writing-table sealing his notes, and putting them ready for the late post, his mother's ear detected the sound of a softly-whistled tune, breaking out again and again :

My love she's but a lassie yet.

It was a sound she had not heard for years, and which she could not think seemly from the lips of a physician in such growing repute as Dr. Graham Urquhart. Then, with the bundle of notes in his hand, he came and stood again by the fireplace, not speaking, but looking at the red embers with a provokingly happy smile on his face. A true Urquhart smile, made up of confident hopefulness, and a touch of self-complacency as well. Such a smile as had sometimes vexed Mrs. Urquhart's soul when, on a face, of which this was the *facsimile*, it had confronted her in moments of disturbance in her early married life. She hardly knew what to make of herself when she felt the old impatience stirring again, and found a sneer curling her old lips, as she marked the contented curve into which her son's had fallen.

“What was the foolish lad so pleased about? What nonsense was he getting into his head now?”

The clock struck again before either spoke, and then it was Dr. Urquhart, who started, for he thought it was about five minutes since he shook hands with Emmie, and had not the least conception that his mother had been looking at him disapprovingly for exactly half an hour. He even lighted and brought her bedroom candle, and stooped to give her the never-omitted good-night kiss, before he perceived the disquiet in her face, and became aware that there was something wrong.

“Mother!” he exclaimed. For a minute they stood looking at each other, and Mrs. Urquhart, though she would not withdraw her eyes from his, felt as if the Land of Beulah was crumbling round her. “Are you really very angry with me for interrupting your talk with Miss West just now?” he asked. “Have not I a right to my share of talk with her as well as you?”

“It was very ill-judged, Graham,” Mrs. Urquhart began, quite relieved that the opportunity of speaking her mind had come so soon. “It does not signify what an old woman like myself says to a girl; but when you strike in you make it serious. If you did but know how you looked when you came stalking down upon us from the inner room.”

"I looked very ridiculous, I daresay; one generally does when one is very much in earnest; but, mother, you are generally so quick at guessing. Don't you understand why I could not bear to hear you put such a notion into her head? She is such a child, she has no thought yet, but for her own people and her own home. I am letting her go without a word, trusting to her coming back as simple-hearted as she went, and I hear you calmly suggesting a possibility I have not allowed myself to think of—that I could not bear!"

"Graham! And you say yourself that 'she is a mere child.'"

"The dearest, the loveliest, the most perfect in the world. My wife and your daughter in the years to come—please God, mother—if only we have her safe back again."

Dr. Urquhart was not really a vain man, only a little over-hopeful, as early successful people are apt to be, and it did not occur to him, that a simple little childish heart like this might be the one good thing in the world—the one prize, that, for all his other triumphs, was beyond his winning. He did not think of that, and having spoken those two fateful words, so sacred to him, he drew up his head, winking a little moisture perhaps from his eyes, but proud and smiling.

Mrs. Urquhart sank down into her chair quite overwhelmed. She had fancied she wished her son to fall in love and marry. She had even been planning magnanimously for Katherine Moore, at some quite distant date—a sensible, reliable, not too beautiful young woman, (for Mrs. Urquhart was of Mr. Caxton's opinion as to the middling style of beauty desirable in one's son's wife,) she could, she thought, have put up with that. But a child with a pink and white face like Emmie West; an impulsive kittenish young thing, who came to her room, not two days ago, to borrow a thimble, confessing that her own had been missing for a fortnight; to give up the mending of her son's linen, and the first place in his affection to such charge as that—and not at a vaguely distant day either! Old as she was, Mrs. Urquhart had too vivid a recollection of scenes following on her Edinburgh journey to be in doubt, when signs of the real, true feeling were before her eyes. Yes, yes,—Love, with all his youthful unrest, and all his jealous pangs and cloudy distractions, had come to-night into the Land of Beulah; but was it the Land of Beulah any longer, or only a hilly part of the journey where Apollyon had to be met and conquered once more? Mrs. Urquhart pressed her hands hard down on the arms of her chair, and turned her head away. She was naturally a warm-tempered, jealous-

hearted woman, and had had hard struggles with herself in past times. But she was used to victory. In five minutes it was all over. Apollyon had put his dart back again into the sheath, and spread his broad wings for flight, worsted for the last time, and sweet breaths from the Heavenly Hills were blowing tranquillity and peace about her old heart again. Was not her own Love waiting for her there, beyond the river? Could she be so base as to grudge this good son a free choice of his?

"Dear little Emmie West!" she said softly. "How I wish I had given her a second kiss to-night—a mother's kiss! Well, we will both be in the way to see her to-morrow morning, before she leaves the house, and whenever the time comes, as of course it will come, as soon as we have her here again, and you bring her to me for my blessing, there will be a warm welcome ready for her. She's too good a daughter not to make a good wife for you, my son, and though she did not of course intend it, she showed plainly enough to-night which way her inclination was going."

"You think so really, mother? You make me very happy."

And when Mrs. Urquhart, afraid of a relapse if she were obliged to listen to any further raptures this even-

ing, stretched out her hand for her bed-candle, she received the most affectionate embrace from her son she had had since the night of her widowhood, when he put his boyish arms round her and offered her the devotion of his young life to make up for her desolation. Of course she had known all along that the hour of her dethronement would come, she would have been quite miserable if it had never come, and now that it was here a little soon, she felt that the one thing to be done was to strip herself of every valued possession still her own, and cast all at the feet of her supplanter. What had she good enough to offer to Emmie West, to the person who had won her son's heart from her?

As she felt too much excited when she got into her own room to prepare for rest at once, she seated herself before her dressing-table and began an elaborate inspection of old treasures, to discover something that might be sacrificed to her rival to-morrow. Should it be the wonderful cairngorm brooch that Graham had bought for her after their first separation with the savings of his school allowance, or the solid gold pencil-case that represented his first fee, or that dearer treasure yet, the old-fashioned locket in which her husband had put the first baby lock of hair? No, that must be a later gift. It was dedicated to-night, but reserved for the bridal morn-

ing. The cairngorm brooch should be offered first. And then Mrs. Urquhart put on her strongest spectacles and wrote a neat little note to be slipped with the brooch into Emmie's hand next morning; wondering, as she laboriously picked her phrases to make them cordial enough, that a disciplined heart should have such clinging roots round earthly possessions still, and yield the first place so grudgingly.

If her ears had been quick enough, or if she could have seen through the ceiling of her room on to the balcony of the story above, her sense of loneliness would have been lessened, for she would have discovered that another heart in that house to-night was going through the self-same struggle. A novice learning her first lesson out of the great book of sacrifice in which women graduate for heaven, instead of a veteran spelling out the *finis* to which she had arrived.

Mildie was the fellow-sufferer. The evening had been a very trying one for her. All the boys, including Harry, had been out of spirits, and consequently captious with her tea-making, and after tea came an order from Mr. West for a general turn out of the common stock of school-books, that the most available specimens might be set aside for Aubrey to take to school with him. Harry presided over the business,

but of course Mildie could not keep herself from hovering near her treasures, and smarting under a keen sense of injustice as she heard one after another of her favourites disposed of without any reference to her claims on them. Mildie's Euclid was it, bought with her own money? Well, it was the only decent one among the lot. She must give it up, and be content with Casa's old one. What could it matter to her if the second half of the third book was torn out? She would never get anything like so far with no one to help her. The Latin Dictionary that had lost all its D's and its L's, might stay on the school-room shelf. The Gentle Lamb was going to leave off Latin and sink to the commercial school after Easter, and as for Mildie, she was only learning for her own amusement. It could not signify if she had to guess all the words beginning with D or L for the rest of her life. A girl's Latin translations were sure to be rum enough, Casa opined, whatever sort of dictionary she used.

To wind up the insults and injuries of the evening, Mildie was requested, quite good-naturedly, for no one had noticed her sufferings, to write Aubrey's name and address legibly in the first page of each of these books—her books that she had valued and used so

much more diligently, and to so much better purpose than anybody else in the house—and then to take them and put them away in his room to be packed in his new school-box to-morrow. She did it, mentally comparing herself to a Carthaginian mother dropping her children through the hands of Moloch; but on leaving Casa's attic, she felt she could not go downstairs again to look at the ravished book-shelves and be badgered by the boys for her red eyes. What remotest corner of the house should she rush to, to have a good cry and ease her angry heart? Members of large families in crowded houses find the luxury of grief as difficult of attainment sometimes as other luxuries generally supposed to be more costly. Mildie could think of only one spot, where she could secure five minutes' solitude and freedom to look as she liked and sob as loudly as she pleased without provoking criticism.

This spot was rather a summer's than a winter's retreat—a certain level bit of the leads at the back of the house, to which there was access by a little door in one of the attic rooms. The night was cold and there was snow on the roof, but what did that matter? Mildie threw a shawl over her head, pushed the little door hard, and emerged among a forest of

chimney-pots. She soon made her way among them to the spot she had in her mind, and then stood still. The novelty of the scene in its winter aspect drew her thoughts from herself at first, and checked the tears she had come to shed. Far below were the gaslights, stretching up and down the narrow back street, and a file of men and women drudging past them, through the black slush to which the morning's snow had been trampled; but around her still lay patches of dazzling white mixed with red gables and yawning black chimneys, and over all stretched a sky of thin cloud, silvered in one spot with frosty moonlight. Dictionaries and Euclids did not look so all important here in this wide white-and-black world as they had looked in the school-room below, but Mildie was not disposed to let go her hold on her grievance so easily. Hers was not a romantic sorrow, like that of a young girl wounded in her first secret love, but perhaps she felt quite as forlorn and sore-hearted as any love-sick maiden, and she had come up here to have it out with herself.

It was hard, yes, it was hard—and no one saw the hardship. She was the only person in the family who cared for study, and she was robbed of her opportunities and turned into a drudge without anyone so much as

acknowledging that it was a sacrifice. Her life was taken up and folded away in the dark, that other people might do as they pleased with theirs—Alma marry a rich man, and Emmie travel abroad with Aunt Rivers, and Casa enjoy privileges he would make nothing of; and all the time Mildie had thoughts and ambitions in that rough head of hers such as would never come to any of them. She knew it well enough, though she knew also that she should be laughed utterly to scorn by everyone if she were even to hint at anything of the kind. Oh, it did seem hard, and now the tears came in a plentiful rain, and Mildie crossed her arms on the wet parapet, quite heedless of damage to the wrap in which she had folded them, and laid her face down and sobbed out her moan. Stormy, heart-shaking sobs at first, dying down into gentler heavings of her breast against the grimy wet parapet she had chosen to weep upon.

"Hush, hush!"

The sound seemed to come out of the air and dropped into Mildie's ears, half soothingly, half remonstratingly, in rough, but loving tones.

"Hush, then, hush!"

She raised her head and looked over the parapet. The words were being spoken down there. A woman was leaning against the railings of an area below, resting for

a moment while she tried to readjust her burden, a wailing child, so as to give it a warmer fold of a ragged shawl in which her half-naked bosom and it were wrapped together.

“Hush, dear, hush!”

It was a softer whisper now, soft, almost satisfied, for the child's cries were stilled; and Mildie, from her station above, saw the mother pull herself upright and set out on her way again, staggering and swaying under her load, from weakness and weariness, but plodding on and on down the dim street, through ice and mire, till darkness and distance swallowed her up.

How long had she been carrying that baby, and how far, Mildie vaguely wondered. How her arms must ache, and yet how closely they clasped their burden round.

There was something more in Mildie after all than the pert pedantic school-girl she appeared to outsiders. She could understand other things besides languages and mathematics, and get glimpses, sometimes in irregular ways, into matters that her studies did not touch at all. She could not have explained to Casabianca why that woman's “Hush!” and the sight of her burdened figure plodding on down the comfortless street, took all the anger and pain out of her heart, and suddenly elevated household drudgery far above learning, into a kind of

glorious martyrdom indeed, which had no shade of bitterness in it; yet such was the effect it had on her. She no longer felt injured or solitary—there were other burden-bearers, more than enough. Was one a woman for anything else? Mildie saw it all in a flash of lightning, and something else too loomed up vague and grand in her thoughts to be pondered over till it grew clear in after years. The woman-born, who called Himself the chief bearer of burdens, was it not in virtue of nearness to Him that the call to bear burdens for others, unthanked and unnoticed, came so often to women? Was there anything really greater? Was it not being called to sit in the highest room, nearest to the Giver of the Feast?

Mrs. Urquhart would have been content with her fellow-struggler's progress in her first lesson, if she could have read the thoughts that busied Mildie's brain as she crept back through the low door into the house again, and set herself to wash the grimy marks from her dress at the sink in the housemaid's closet. It was cold there; but Emmie and her mother were still talking in the bedroom, and Mildie resolved not to disturb them by bringing her own uncomfortable self into their presence before it was necessary.

When she crept into the room at last, all was quiet, and Emmie was kneeling by her bedside, lingering a little

longer than usual, this last night, over her evening prayers. For the last week or so, since a certain conversation with Alma, Emmie had added a clause to her petitions for relations and friends which had Alma's name in it, a prayer hardly worded but breathed low—that when the time came Alma might be led to make Somebody happy—or rather kept from giving him such pain as Emmie knew of. To-night she paused over the words, for she remembered suddenly that it was too late to frame such a petition now. It was all over, and Alma had put it out of her power to give joy or pain to that person more. There was, as he had phrased it himself, “nothing more to be said.” The recollection brought Emmie's prayers to a hasty conclusion. She jumped up and hurried to bed, for she was conscious that a great throb had come to her heart with that certainty, a throb of triumph, not of pain, and it frightened her to find that such a feeling had come from such a cause.

CHAPTER V.

SNOWDROPS.

There is no time like Spring,
When life's alive in everything,
Before new nestlings sing,
Before deft swallows speed their journey back
Along the trackless track—
God guides their wing,
He spreads their table that they nothing lack—,
Before the daisy grows a common flower,
Before the sun has power
To scorch the world up in his noontide hour.

To enjoy a walk through Kensington Gardens as Christabel Moore enjoyed hers one soft February afternoon a week after Emmie left England, one must have lived for a year at least in a close quarter of London; one must have had a good deal of anxious hard work to do there, and perhaps added to this, one must be young, and an artist, and a dreamer with an untroubled heart, like Christabel.

One thing is certain that the touch of the sun-warmed wind on her cheek, and the fresh, growing smell from the borders, and the tremulous quiver of life in the

slender branch-tips against the sky, transported Christabel into a world of rapture where not many people could have followed her. Katherine could not. She would have enjoyed a leisurely walk beneath the budding trees, and noted all the tokens of reviving vegetation more minutely perhaps than Christabel, but she would have seen a good many other things too that would somewhat have spoiled the spring poetry for her. The pinched, pale faces of the group of children, hunting among that heap of dead leaves for a possible last year's chestnut, the staggering gait of the man who had just left the seat by the pond and wandered away among the trees, the hunchbacked figure crutching itself slowly down the broad walk.

The human side of the picture would have been too prominent with Katherine to permit her to revel in the natural beauty; but Christabel was endowed with the fair gift of seeing everywhere just what she chose to see, one aspect of things at a time, and that so intently as to shut out all else, even herself, from her thoughts.

To-day, she was not merely in Kensington Gardens, she was walking through a bridal chamber, and seeing the newly-awakened earth deck herself in the fairest of her many robes to receive her bridegroom's greeting kiss—that vesture of faintest, tenderest green, which in

England, nature puts on for a day or two at the opening of the year and lays aside in tears, never to be resumed again, when her bridegroom, summer, disappoints her and delays his coming. No touch of the evanescent glory was lost on Christabel; her eyes greedily drank in all the delicate colouring, the pale sunshine, the pearly-grey shadows, the misty haze of green in which the black branches of the distant trees seemed to be bathed, the touches of autumn russet lingering here and there, the lovely tints of the clouds reflected in the water. As she looked, her pulse quickened with a vague expectation and hope of coming joy, as if she herself had become a portion of the new activity she felt stirring in all things around her.

It never occurred to her that passers-by might stare to see her stand motionless so long peering down at the common wonder of an open-eyed daisy in the grass. And as she followed with rapture in her eyes the heavy flight of a rook over the roof of Kensington Palace, bearing a twig for the repair of its nest in the venerable rookery behind Holland House, she did not hear the remark "How strange!" which two ladies who had left their carriage at the gate, and were taking a turn down the broad walk, exchanged as they passed her, their long trains almost touching her dusty feet. They even glanced

back, when they had walked some distance, to ascertain if she was still standing gazing up at the clouds, so strangely had the intense joy in her small pale face struck them, and so unaccountable did it appear to them, that a grown-up person should take such an absorbed interest in the flight of a bird. A shabby person too, whose dark dress—though it was brightened with scarlet ribbons—was made of the commonest materials, and of a style that had not come out of any fashion-book. What reason could she have to be happy because the rooks were building their nests again and spring was coming? Spring could not mean a gay London season for her.

Christabel's soul had followed the rook to its wind-rocked ancestral castle, and wished it success in its building, by the time these observers had done puzzling themselves about her, and then she turned off the walk among the trees, ready for the next pleasure the spring afternoon had to give her. She had a full hour for enjoyment, for a lesson she had come into that part of London to give had been interrupted at its commencement, and as Katherine would not expect her home till the usual time, she could spend the interval in walking about as she pleased. The feel of the grass under her feet carried her thoughts back to other springs, and visions rose of green valleys starred with primroses

running up between the velvety or wooded sides of Lancashire hills, but she did not regret them, they were as much hers here as there, for they were a part of the spring in which she was rejoicing.

The sunshine and the west wind were telling her of the growth of flowers somewhere, and that was enough, nay, did not the air even seem to bring her a faint—faint suggestion of the delicate odour of spring flowers? This became so real, that it woke her from her reverie at last, and forced her to notice where she had wandered. She was standing close to the gardener's cottage, near Queen's Gate, and the flowers she had been dreaming about were at her feet—not mountain primroses indeed, but something that for the moment did quite as well for Christabel—a border fenced in, but open to sight, of early snowdrops, with here and there a crocus-bud breaking like a flake of fire among their snow.

The discovery so delighted her that she turned round involuntarily to look for Katherine to share her joy, and her eyes fell on a little child lying asleep close to the railings, through which he had pushed the fingers of one hand. He had crept away from a group of larger children at play by the pond, tempted by the flowers, and fallen asleep weary with his efforts to reach them.

Christabel stooped down to look at the little white

face, and one of those quick impulses that broke in upon her dreamy moods seized her. Poor little human bud that had so much less promise in its opening than the brother flower-buds it had stretched after in vain, what could she do to bring a little touch of springtide pleasure near it?

She had some biscuits in her bag which she had forgotten to eat at luncheon time, and the notion of slipping them into the thin hand that lay stretched out sleepily on the grass, and then stealing out of sight, leaving the little one to open its eyes on the gift without any clue from whence it came, just pleased her fancy. The sleepy fingers clutched the food with the instinct of hunger, and Christabel, stooping down, drew the corner of the child's ragged frock over his hand to hide what it held from any covetous passer-by, then she stood watching till the eyelids that had half opened at her touch closed comfortably, and the even breathing of baby sleep came again.

She was just thinking of moving away, when a voice close behind her said :

" Good afternoon, Miss Moore ; is it one of our old friends you have got there, or a ' babe in the wood ' that you are covering with leaves ? May another robin come and help ? "

She turned at the sound of the voice, and her hand was taken and eagerly clasped in another, and she was conscious of a look of extreme pleasure in two handsome grey eyes which met and held hers a second or two before she could think of any word to say in answer.

It was not exactly surprise at the meeting that kept her silent; she had always thought she should meet "Fortunatus" (as she called him in her thoughts) again sometime; it was rather the wonder that comes when an event falls out so exactly as it has been imagined, that it seems a result, or an echo of the thought. If she had spoken out the first words that came to her, she would have said: "So you are really here to-day. I felt as if you ought to come on such a day as this, and you are here."

Luckily words always lagged very far behind thoughts with her, and her companion was in no hurry for her to speak; he was quite satisfied with what her eyes and the delicate rose flush that spread over her face said as they stood together in the spring sunshine. Even when the greetings were ended, and they were walking side by side, the conversation flowed slowly at first, and they did not for a few minutes look at each other again. Each seemed to be afraid of disturbing the impression of that involuntary meeting gaze which had made

questions and answers, greetings and assurances of pleasure in each other's company, so ridiculously poor and unnecessary.

Lord Anstice spoke first.

"Well, I shall always know where to find you for the future. I shall look out for the most miserable, starved, ragged child in London, and stick close to him, and by-and-by you'll appear to give him a surprise."

"I did not know I was such a difficult person to find," said Christabel, shyly.

"You are, however; I have called three times in Saville Street since I got back to London and each time you were out, and on the last occasion I had the door almost slammed in my face by an old dragon who muttered something about lodgers' visitors. After that I invaded your old watchmaker's shop, and tried to pump him about your times and seasons of going out and being at home, but not a word could I drag out of him, though I hung about his place over an hour, and would have bought a chronometer if he would have let me."

"How odd of David! But you quite mistook the way to his heart if you showed even a distant intention of carrying off one of his three chronometers. A reasonable silver hunting watch he might have sold you with pleasure, if he thought you capable of taking care of it, and

that you could rightly afford to pay for it, but one of his chronometers that he has been working at half his life-time,—it would take a long and intimate acquaintance for David to trust you with that, and,” glancing up timidly, but yet with a mischievous gleam in her eyes, “I doubt whether you are exactly the sort of person ever to merit such a mark of confidence from him.”

“Why not? Why should not he trust me?”

“The story of Fortunatus’s purse would tell terribly against you with David. He is a Scotchman, and a political economist as well, and I have often wondered what he would say of our indiscriminate giving that night. Do you know I have even been a little bit afraid myself that it was wrong—to *you*—I hope——”

Christabel hesitated; and then, looking up into Fortunatus’s face, while the colour rushed over her own, she said, earnestly:

“I have often thought about it, and hoped that my recklessness that night did not really inconvenience you—that it has been made up to you some way. Will you tell me if the engagement, the work that has kept you away from London all this time has proved as profitable as I hope it has, and more than made amends for your generosity?”

Her eyes fell from his face as she spoke, and wandered

over his person as if half afraid of detecting some sign of privation, and he turned a little away, colouring almost as vividly as she had done.

"Work, oh, it did not make any difference to me! But, Miss Christabel," in a pleased tone, "it was immensely jolly of you to trouble your head as much as all that about me. Nobody else does. You have really been afraid I should miss that money?"

"You must forgive me if I have made a mistake; you see I have not at present any very grand notions of an artist's earnings. My own are not so magnificent as to warrant recklessness, and though I am beginning to have a few friends in my own profession, I don't get much encouragement from their experience. We none of us can boast of rapid success, and did you not tell me you were only a beginner?"

"Only a beginner, as you say; but—these friends of yours," (in a tone of discontent) "you said *we*."

"Why should not I have friends? I am not the only girl in London working at art."

"Oh yes, I see, lady friends. Well, I don't fall in with men friends so easily. I have always been a surly-tempered, lonely sort of fellow, since I can remember myself, best pleased with my own company. When I was little my mother shut me up, and made a misanthrope of

me by way of keeping me out of temptation, and when I came to be my own master, though I broke loose at first, and saw something of the world, the instinct to get back into my shell and follow out my crotchets alone soon came back. I don't like half the world to know what I'm doing. My notion of happiness is to get out of the crowd and feel free, with plenty of space to do what I like, and be what I like, without anyone troubling his or her head about me. I fancy that must be your taste too."

"I am not over six feet high," said Christabel, peeping up at her companion's towering head, and not being able to keep a gleam of the admiration she felt from stealing under her thick eyelashes. "There is no need for me to pine for solitudes. I can creep about low down in a crowd without anybody seeing me."

"I saw you, though. The two millions of people in London could not hide you from me. I found you out. I shall always feel grateful to a crowd for that."

There was a moment's silence, and then Christabel said, with that fine smile of hers, just touched with sarcasm: "Does nothing short of an accident in a crowd force a friend upon you? I should not have given you credit for such resolute reserve, from what I have seen of you."

"What! Because I have talked of myself to you,

and, as you think, told you so much about my private concerns? You'll understand the ins and outs of my oddities better some day, and meanwhile I can tell you that it takes a great deal more than an accident in a crowd to make me speak out. It takes *you*—nothing in the world less than that would do it,—and besides I had seen you before the accident, and made up my mind in a minute to see you again if I could."

"You would have found it very hard," said Christabel. "I am a Will-o'-the-Wisp even to myself, and I don't think *I* am always to be seen at the place where my body is, if you can understand such a thing. I can walk about and talk very fairly well to most people without being *there* at all. I have been doing it all this afternoon, till first the flowers and then you, brought the two halves of me together."

"Did I not know that as well as you can tell it me? I was watching you for half an hour before I spoke to you, waiting for you to come back. I shall never mind waiting till you are ready to talk; it interests me; and I say, now we have met a second time, we are not going to lose sight of each other for two months again, are we?"

"I don't know," said Christabel, hesitatingly; "we are very busy people, Katherine and I, and we have not much time to give to our friends. I am afraid—I mean

I think—it must be, on rare days, Christmas Eves, spring days in the middle of winter like this, that we look for meetings. That is how I think it will be.”

“I don’t think so. That would not satisfy me. It might suit you well enough, who have lots of friends, all those people you called *we*, but you forget how lonely I am. You will see me a great deal oftener than that now I have come back to London.”

“Are you really quite as lonely as you say?” asked Christabel smiling. “You talk of my friends, but there is your cousin, whom all my little Saville Street world are enthusiastic in praising, whom even the magnificent Miss Alma Rivers is said to regard with favour. We have no such hero among our acquaintance, to give us consequence and stand by us in our troubles.”

“Wynyard, so people praise him to *you*, do they! Spare me the repetition. He has been thrust upon me all my life by one person or another, and there are reasons why I have always more or less of an uncomfortable feeling when I am with him. I don’t mean but that he is a thoroughly good fellow, and I’ve no doubt I should, as you suggest, take my troubles to him, but for pleasure give me a companion that no one has recommended to me. Why not you and your sister? Why should not you help me through some of my lonely evenings? Why

should not you give lessons to me, as well as to your old watchmaker ? ”

“ You would soon find old David a very contentious fellow-pupil, and would tire of sitting among his clocks, listening to his bad French and queer philosophy.”

“ I did not mean that. I meant why should I not come to Saville Street on the evenings when you are at home, and have a lesson—say in drawing ? There must be lots of things that you could teach me, for I have never found anyone from whom I could learn anything worth learning yet.”

“ You ought to be able to draw a great deal better than I do to call yourself an artist at all—but——”

“ You will let me come ? ”

“ I will ask Katherine. It is not our own house, you know ; we pay a very small rent for our attic-rooms, and we don’t feel that we have a right to bring many visitors, much less a regular pupil to the house ; and besides, we think a great deal of ourselves, it is true, but hardly so much as to induce us to undertake you for a scholar.”

“ It must be managed somehow ; we will never be so long again—two months—without seeing each other.”

Christabel’s smiling eyes fell under the look that went with these words, and they sauntered on under the trees in another pleasant, spell-bound silence, that lasted for

many minutes without either finding it awkward. It seemed a waste of time to talk, while the sunshine fell so softly round them, and the certainty of content in each other's presence had stolen into their hearts, making them tremblingly afraid of perilling their new joy by words that were sure to be less true than the thoughts which seemed to pass unexpressed between them. It might have been an hour, and it might have been five, for any account of time they took, when Christabel found herself close to the gate by which she was accustomed to leave the Gardens on her way to Saville Street, and noticed how long their shadows lay on the gravel walk.

"I must make haste home," she exclaimed, "Katherine will be there before me, and I don't like that to happen, for since her accident she has taken to being nervous for me, though never for herself."

"But home is a long way off, and I am going to call on your sister; our walk does not end here."

"I am afraid it must. I shall ride home in that red omnibus you see standing there, and I don't think Katherine would like me to bring a visitor, not even a new pupil, home to-night. She is not quite strong yet, and she will have had an anxious day. She was to see a friend this afternoon who has undertaken to give her information and advice about the next steps she is to take

in following out her medical studies. She fears she has come to an end of the little she can do in England, and the decision she will have heard to-day is all important to us, and will need a great deal of talking over, and perhaps the forming of new plans."

"Not anything that will take you away from London, I hope. Do you know once or twice while I was in Scotland such a horror came over me with the thought that I might never find you again, that I could hardly keep myself from rushing off by the next train to make sure that those wonderful attics and yourself were in the land of reality where I could get at you. You won't vanish away suddenly now that I have found you again?"

"What makes you think of such a thing? I shall go wherever Katherine has to go, of course, but our changes can't be sudden; we could not give up our pupils and our work at once, too much depends on them, as I should think you would know."

"It would be too hard on me, if, when for the first time in my life I have found friends to my mind, they should be whisked away before I have got any good out of them. Shall you be passing through the Gardens at the same hour next week? Since Saville Street seems to be an almost impregnable fortress, I must look out for you here. I shall be sure to meet you here, at all events."

"Yes, at all events," said Christabel, disengaging her hand from the farewell clasp which threatened to be too long. She did not feel quite satisfied with herself when she was in the omnibus on her way back to Katherine, and was able to think quietly over what she had said and looked and felt. She wished, since she could not deny to herself that this unexpected meeting was a great event to her, that she had accepted Fortunatus's offer of companionship home, and given Katherine an opportunity of seeing and understanding once for all the terms of close acquaintanceship into which they two had unaccountably stumbled. She regretted for the hundredth time that small concealment on Christmas Eve, which had made her, so she thought, shy of speaking her artist friend's name to Katherine, and induced her to hide away, as she had never before hidden thought or feeling from Katherine, the recollections that had been often in her mind: the oftener, perhaps, because she had never spoken them. How could she begin now, and how would Katherine bear the revelation of an interest absorbing her, in whose beginnings she had had no part? Was it really true that such a thing had happened as that she had a separate interest from Katherine? Christabel tried for a time to argue

the unwelcome conviction away, but ended by only wishing vehemently that she could feel as free from any personal concern in the discussion of future plans that was to take place this evening as she had felt when she set forth on her day's work. There was no use she found in telling herself that she was free; she must keep her strength for struggling to put the selfish, unshared interest aside, and try to hide from Katherine's tender eyes the anxiety she was herself aware of; the sick eagerness which she feared would make her hang breathless on Katherine's words, and feel as if each wise reason she might bring forward in favour of leaving London was a sentence of banishment, a death warrant to a hope which was already the sum of interest in life to her. What a terrible bondage to have fallen into since morning, and yet the next minute Christabel was smiling to herself: since morning—one little day—and it was possible to live a week, a month, a year, a lifetime of days, every one of which might be rich with the same delight that this one had held.

CHAPTER VI.

LETTERS.

When daffodils begin to peer
With heigh! the doxy over the dale;
Why then comes in the sweet o' the year,
For the red blood shines in the winter's pale.

KATHERINE was the first to reach home. While she waited for Christabel, she moved their tea-table from the neighbourhood of the fire to the window-recess, spread the tea before the open window, and placed a little bunch of violets among the cups and saucers to celebrate, on this first mild evening of the year, a change from their winter to their summer quarters, as important to them as going out of town is to other people. She had finished her arrangements some little time before Christabel appeared, yet she did not, as she had been in the habit of doing lately, greet her entrance with an exclamation of relief. She looked up eagerly indeed from a letter she had just finished reading, but there was some other thought than

welcome of Christabel in her face, something so important that it had put ordinary thoughts aside for a while.

"Letters," said Christabel, hurrying up to her, and finding her heart sink with vague foreboding as she looked into Katherine's deep eyes and tried to make out what the unusual expression in them meant. An augury of change, surely, but what of that? Christabel had always hitherto been ready for the next step, not having had any great stake in things as they were, till now. "Letters for us?"

"Yes, indeed; and one that will have a most important bearing on our discussion to-night. I have hardly taken it in yet. At first sight it seems almost too good to be real, and that there must be objections underneath when we come to think it over. But let us have tea first. I had meant this to be our festival of settling into spring habits, and I intended to give our sun-set chimney-pots an affectionate greeting for another summer's contemplation of them, and here comes a reversal of everything. But eat first. What have we to be afraid of, dearest? So long as we keep together, and our plans are progressing, what can it matter whether chimney-pots or snow mountains reflect the sunsets we watch side by side?"

"Snow mountains!" repeated Christabel, slowly. "Then I suppose the result of your inquiries to-day convinces you of the uselessness of remaining longer in London, and that you must seek what you want further away; but I thought it was to be Paris?"

"So it was this morning, but I had come to the conclusion just now that for *that* I must wait another whole year. I have consulted my friends, and even had a talk with Dr. Urquhart, who was wonderfully kind, and entered into the matter thoroughly; we won't say for whose sake, but certainly it was not through any special sympathy with my aims. It is perfectly true, as I feared, the one door which let one lady-student through is closed for ever against women in England. My year's private study has given me courage to persevere, and certainty of my own powers of endurance, but it has not advanced me a single step towards my end, and every month longer in London will be lost time. I had come to the sad conclusion that another summer at least must be wasted, for that our funds were not in a condition to allow us to risk such a step as removal to Paris, where we might be long before you got any work, and where, though we might easily find another 'Air Throne,' we should not have such a landlady as Mrs. West, or such friends as the Urquharts: I came home out of heart, think-

ing that everything was against me. I am not so strong as I used to be since my illness, I think, and just as I was looking at our chimney-pots, and wondering how long the months of another summer of hope deferred would seem, I heard the postman's knock down below, and the next minute up came Mildred West with the letters we are going to read together after tea. You look pale, darling, you have walked too far. Let me see you eat and drink before we say anything more. Oh, when shall I have worked my way up so far that I can put an end to drudgery for you, and make such a home for you as you ought to have?"

"Make me into an idle young lady again, what heresy!" cried Christabel, rousing herself with a great effort to speak lightly.

After tea she brought a stool and placed it so that she could rest her head against Katherine's knee, and hide her face, lest, in the course of the discussion, it should say something she did not want it to say.

"Now for the letters," she began; "there seems to be a budget."

"The thick one is from Emmie West, and when we have settled our own business, we will invite the party from the back sitting-room downstairs to hear you read it aloud. Mildie is always hanging about looking out

for an invitation to come up here, and as our time will be short, perhaps we had better give them all the pleasure we can."

"Oh, Katherine, let me have the other letter at once! Don't play with my anxiety with any more hints about going. Tell me the news at once."

"Directly. It is my own anxiety I am playing with, lest there should turn out to be a flaw in the good news when we come to look at it closely. Do you remember a blind lady with whom we travelled up to London eighteen months ago, to whom I talked a great deal during the journey?"

"Yes—yes; you found a bag her companion had lost, and she seemed to take a liking to you."

"And was interested in my intention of studying medicine. She gave me some introductions, and we exchanged names and addresses when we parted at the station. I wrote once to the address she gave me three months after we settled ourselves here, and now more than a year after comes her answer. Here it is; she writes from Zürich, where she is living in a little house of her own, and you will see she has ascertained that I can take a medical degree there as well as in Paris, and she offers me a home in her house if I like to come and act as her secretary while I am studying. The lady

who has lived with her hitherto is going to be married, and if I accept the offer, she wants me to come at once. Read what she says."

There was a little pause, and then Christabel, as she folded the sheet and put it back in Katherine's hand, said in a low voice :

"There is nothing said about me ; she seems to have forgotten all about me."

"Dearest, but you don't suppose that even such an immediate prospect as this opens of gaining my great wish could make me forget you for an instant? Don't you see what is said in the postscript about cheap lodgings in the town, if I prefer to have my evenings to myself? And there is the promise of a small salary. This is what we have to consider, whether the money we have in hand now, will cover our journey to Zürich, and your expenses there for the first three months. After that time you will have got employment, teaching or drawing, and my first quarter's salary will be due, and I shall perhaps be adding something more to our funds by nightwork. Bring out the money-box, and let us count our savings. If we can't make them do, the whole scheme, tempting as it looks, must be given up: but I am sanguine, people live on such small sums abroad, and I for one should feel a dragon's appetite for work, and a giant's

strength, if I saw the way to my end so plainly before me."

Christabel shook her head as she rose to comply with Katherine's request. "I will bring the box, dear, but I know the hollowness of its condition better than you do, for I have managed it since you were ill. Perhaps not so cleverly as you would have done. However, let us face the worst."

Bringing the box and pouring its contents on Katherine's knee, she said: "Count out your money, Kitty, before it is too dark to know sovereigns from shillings. There is something more due to me for this term's lessons, but I cannot get hold of that till Easter, and I should perhaps forfeit the greater part of my school fees, if I left suddenly without proper notice."

Some talk and calculation followed, and then Katherine slowly replaced the money, piece by piece, in the box, and locked it.

"Well," said Christabel, putting her hand over Katherine's. It was almost too dark to see, but Christabel felt a large tear fall on the back of her hand from Katherine's eyes. It took a great deal to make Katherine weep. Christabel had to look back to quite childish days for the last time—an occasion when there had been

a little quarrel between the sisters—when this had happened.

“I am very foolish,” Katherine said faintly, “but I was thinking of what you said one day about the consequences of my accident stretching out so much further than we foresaw at first. If I had not been ill—if even I had not yielded to your entreaties, and bought a warm dress and cloak for my first going out, I need not have sent the refusal to Zürich that now must go. How little I thought that night, when I held back the man from striking his wife again, that I was knocking over my own best chance of gaining what I had most at heart. Do you remember what you said about the Nornir’s thread? We did not know then that there was another great knot in the weaving still to come.”

“No,” said Christabel. Then she paused, for her thoughts flew off to yet another very differently coloured thread in the web of consequences, and her heart began to beat so quickly that she could not speak. She knew now that the decision which had cost Katherine that bitter tear had been felt as an escape by her—an escape from a pain so great that it actually seemed worse to bear than the sight of Katherine’s sorrow. What could she do to atone for such selfishness? Katherine must not be sacrificed for her just now, when

conscience told her that the entire exclusive love which had hitherto made the utmost sacrifice for each other seem only natural, was beginning on her side to have a flaw in it.

Katherine rose to return the treasure-box to its usual place, and so end the conversation, but Christabel put out her hand, and drew her back into her chair. "Wait a minute, dear, I have something to say to you. Katherine, you must not give up Zürich. This offered help is the turning-point of your life, the one chance of success that you can hardly hope to have again if you turn away from it now."

"I acknowledge that," answered Katherine, mournfully; "but——"

"Listen to me. You must go alone to Zürich and live with Miss Campbell as she proposes till you receive your first quarter's salary, and till I have fulfilled my engagements with my present pupils. Then it might be prudent for me to join you. Yes, we must separate for a little while."

"What are you talking of? We have never been parted in our lives. To leave you alone! I could not bear it."

"Mothers and daughters have to part, and husbands and wives sometimes," said Christabel, laying her cheek

caressingly against Katherine's knee; "they live through the time."

"You could bear it, then?" asked Katherine, almost in a tone of reproach.

"For your good; to help forward your career that we have planned so often; that we went out together into the world to achieve."

"You frighten me," exclaimed Katherine. "If I could leave you to work alone here—you—my little sister whom I promised my mother on her death-bed to watch over, I should fear that I had really grown hard and selfish, that I had let ambition for a career eat the womanliness out of me."

"I thought we held that women could take care of themselves and did not want any watching over?" said Christabel, falteringly.

Some warning words of old Mrs. Urquhart's recurred to Katherine's memory as Christabel spoke, and sent a sudden pang through her. A sense of the terribleness of life, unless the threads of its circumstance were indeed held in a heavenly Father's hand, came over her, and she hid her face in her hands, shuddering.

She must be changed since her accident, she said to herself, if such a shudder could come on hearing a boast from Christabel that used to sound so natural. Was it

her nerves merely that had been shattered, or was her self-confidence leaving her, or were the foundations on which she had stood in fancied security hitherto, breaking away to make room for something else? Perhaps just now Christabel's sense and judgment might be the most trustworthy; and Christabel was all the while talking on soothingly, mingling her arguments with caresses and gentle raillery at the inconsistency of Katherine's reluctance.

"I shall be the worst of the two, when the time of parting comes," she said. "You will have to scold me into courage, then, but while it is still three or four days distant I am as brave as you will be at the last. I can see clearly what is the reasonable thing to do. You talk of leaving me alone, but it is not the same as it would have been last year. I have friends. I shall not be lonely."

"There are Mrs. West and Mrs. Urquhart who would be kind," said Katherine, in a calmer tone; "but they are too much occupied with business and cares of their own to bestow thought on you, and now Emmie is away there will be no one to help you through your lonely evenings."

"But I have made a few friends of my very own," said Christabel. "My two neighbours at the drawing-

school walk home with me sometimes and press me to visit them, and" (hurrying out the words) "I met another friend to-day in Kensington Gardens, that Mr. Anstice, who helped you on the day of the accident, and came to see us when you were ill. He is back in London, and talks of calling here. Oh, I shall have more visitors while you are away than Mary Ann will consent to open the door to. You have no notion how gay I mean to be, I shall perhaps turn out a leader of society in Bohemia when I am left to myself."

"You talk bravely, dearest; but I am afraid you have no notion of the difference between depending on chance acquaintances for society, and such companionship as we have had together day by day."

"It will be three months' starving, I know," said Christabel, "but think of the joy of meeting again. I want you really to understand that it will not be so bad for me as you suppose. Spring is coming on, and you know how light-hearted I always feel in the spring. Every fresh flower will tell me that the time for our meeting is nearer, and you will send me thick letters, like this one from Emmie West which is waiting on the table to be looked at. Yours will never wait. They will give me a share in all you are enjoying, your snow mountains, and such flowers as I

suppose I have no idea of. How I shall revel in your descriptions of them."

"It is time we turned to Emmie's letter. I promised to call her brothers and sister to hear it read. They will be waiting downstairs for our summons."

"Let them wait ten minutes longer till you have written your answer to Zürich. Katherine dear, we shall both sleep better to-night if we know that the decision has been made, and the matter settled irrevocably. Our hearts will be fit to break, perhaps, but the thing must be, and I know that to have had a long time of indecision first will make the blow harder to bear when it comes. There, I am going to bring your desk and a candle into the window recess, and when you have written your letter to Miss Campbell, I will run downstairs and beg Harry West to post it before he comes up here with the other three, to hear Emmie's news. Then it will be settled, and I shall kiss Dr. Katherine Moore when I go to bed to-night, feeling more certainty that she will exist for other people as well as for myself some day, than I have been able to feel for the last six months or more."

Christabel retained her gay manner till the letter was written and posted; but it was Katherine who read Emmie's long epistle to the brothers and sisters

who came up to hear it half an hour afterwards. By that time Christabel's eyes were in no state for reading, though she listened to every tone of Katherine's voice, storing them in her memory to feed on when the room should be empty of such sounds. The meaning of the words made very little impression on *her*. It was well that the three younger Wests ranged before Katherine on the skeleton's box, and Harry with his elbows on the window-sill, had minds sufficiently at leisure to appreciate the confidences that Emmie had penned with an express view to this "Air Throne" audience.

"Did you ever think much about caterpillars?" Katherine read. "Did you ever wonder how they feel when they first get out of their chrysalises, and find that they have wings? I believe I can tell you, for I fancy it must be just as I felt on the first morning when I awoke at La Roquette and looked out of the window. It was the colour of the sunshine that surprised me most—that and the stillness. I opened my window and put out my head and said, 'Am I Emmie West? Am I alive, or have I died in the night, and is this a new sort of existence I have come into, where everything is as different from all I have known before as this golden sunshine differs from daylight in Saville Street?' It really was a puzzle just

for a minute, and then of course I woke quite up, and knew that I was *here*. *Here* is Madame de Florimel's little château, so the village people call it—a farm-house on the side of a hill surrounded by hills. Here Madame comes in the summer, when her grand old château down in the valley among the vines and olives and flower-fields is quite too hot for an English person to live in. Madame de Florimel is English—'one of you others,' as we are told twenty times a day by the natives of the place; but though she is proud of this herself, and likes to let the little château every winter to an English family for the sake of society, you would not guess her to be English to look at her and hear her speak. She has lived forty-two years at La Roquette, and she was only eighteen when she left England; so you can believe that in spite of all the talk made here about her English ways, we do not recognise her for a countrywoman so unmistakably as her neighbours seem to expect. I begin with Madame de Florimel the first thing after my awakening in the morning at La Roquette, because she really was the very next thing that happened to me after my bath of sunshine. I was only half-way through my dressing when there came a knock at my bedroom door, and I opened it upon—what do you think?—a large clothes-basket full of flowers—pale blue double violets, great yellow and white

roses, anemones, narcissus, awfully lovely irises, white and blue. I could only scream with joy and bury my face in the flowers. I did not at first notice a girl who had taken the basket from her head, as I opened the door, and who went on telling me in French that she had come up from the great château with this little greeting from Madame de Florimel, who wished thus to convey her sentiments to the English ladies who had arrived at her *maisonnette* last night. It was well that my toilette was pretty well advanced, for the girl (her name is Madelon Claire) walked straight into my bedroom as soon as I lifted my face from the flowers, and when she had put down her burden on my dressing-table, she did not seem to see any reason why she should not stay to see the end. Fancy dressing in a room with all those distracting flowers under your looking-glass, and a French peasant-girl, in a white cap and gold earrings in her ears, looking on! She was not as shy as I was. She took up and examined my ribbons and cuffs, and went into such ecstasies over that large ugly cairngorm brooch of old Mrs. Urquhart's, that I think I should have let her carry it away with her, if gratitude to Mrs. Urquhart had not restrained me from parting with the present she seemed to think I should value very highly. Before I was ready to put the brooch into my collar, Madelon had told me

nearly all her history. She is not Madame de Florimel's servant, as I supposed at first. She lives in a farm-house in a valley behind our hill, and she had gone to the château quite early that morning to take a *bouquet d'oranges* and some *pommes d'amour* to Madame de Florimel; and madame, knowing that she must pass her *maisonnette* on the way home, permitted her to have the honour of bearing this little offering of flowers to the English ladies. Observe—no one but 'madame' calls the new château a *maisonnette*. Madelon explained carefully to me that she was repeating madame's word, and seemed anxious to impress me with madame's combined magnificence and humility. It was early when Madelon and I left my bedroom, too early for Ward to have begun to think of taking Aunt Rivers her earliest cup of tea, and as I knew I could not be wanted for an hour or so, I accepted Madelon's invitation to walk home with her and be introduced to her mother, 'who,' Madelon said, 'would be ravished with the honour of receiving a first visit from the English young lady. Madame would not grudge her this great pleasure, as she was an invalid whom everyone indulged.' I laughed at the notion of being of so much consequence that it mattered to whom I paid a first visit, and tried to explain what sort of a person Emmie West really was; but

Madelon only laughed till her face was all dimples, and, as French phrases in which to disparage myself did not come to hand readily, I gave it up and followed her down a flight of stone steps into the garden. Madelon left me there, to beg a cup of coffee and a piece of bread for me from La Fermière, who lives in the lower rooms of the little château, and I stood and looked about me. There were three or four olive-trees in front of me, and their leaves, with the sun shining on them, looked just as if they were all made of frosted silver; beyond came a vineyard, red-brown earth with rows of tree-stumps, like dwarfish hill-men struggling to get their arms and heads out of the ground; then a strip of green corn, and then the hill dips down into a deep ravine. All this is madame's property, where we are at home, but I am afraid I shall never make you see what lies further away. Hills behind hills, slopes of olives, dark green pines, bare mountains, pink and lilac and grey, with here and there dazzling white snow-caps towering up into the sky. Before I had half done looking, Madelon called me to take my coffee, and I saw that La Fermière was waiting at the door of her house to give it me herself, and that a whole troop of night-capped children were peeping out from behind her ample skirts, to get sight of me as I drank it.

“ ‘Will you go round by the road or through the *bosquet*?’ Madelon asked, and of course I chose the *bosquet*, though I did not tell her that I had never been in anything that calls itself a wood in my life before.

“ A little winding path led us through the wood, which I now perceived is only a belt of firs sheltering madame’s best vineyard, and then we came out half-way down the hill-side, and I could see what a valley is like. Oh, so sunny, and green, and still, such golden lights on the grass, such clear blue shadows from the olive-trees, such thousands of anemones and violets at one’s feet, such blue overhead; and down below at the bottom, a winding pathway and a little river where some women were kneeling washing clothes in the running water. We could hear their voices chattering, and the gurgle of the stream among the big stones where they were pounding their linen.

“ Near the foot of the hill we passed under some olive-trees, in one of which stood a young man with a great pruning-hook lopping a branch. He called out to tell Madelon that he had been fishing in the river that morning, and that he had already been to her house to take a little offering of eels to her mother for the *déjeûner*.

“ ‘Does everybody take offerings to everybody?’ I

asked; and Madelon blushed, and looked shyly up into the tree where the young man stood balancing himself on a bough; then she seized my hand and made me run quite to the end of the slope before she answered.

“‘But no—it is not the custom of the country to make offerings—except—to madame, or on *fête* days, or at the New Year, or when one returns after an absence; but—in short, what would you have, when a young man lives in the next valley, and meets you at all the *fêtes* and coming home from mass on Sunday? He—naturally wishes to please your mother.’

“By-and-by, Madelon stopped and pointed out a square white house far up on an opposite hill, where she said the young man’s parents, Monsieur and Madame Barbou, live and own all the vineyards and olive grounds that stretch down into another little valley.

“She said it was a better property than her father’s, because the Barbou fields lie on the sunny side of the hill; and that it was better cultivated too, for Monsieur and Madame Barbou were so happy as to have a good son to work for them, whereas, she was only a girl, and her parents are alone but for her. ‘Still, I have courage,’ she added. ‘And now you see our house, mademoiselle; we climb here—to the right, and you will always know

your way by that clump of orange-trees—the only ones that grow at this end of the valley.’

“I wish you could have seen her, Katherine, when she said, ‘Still I have courage’—you would have liked the brave look in her brown eyes so much. She is no taller than I am, and she has slender shoulders, and a thin brown face with a nice dimple in each cheek when she laughs; yet I find that she works hard in the fields digging among the vines and olives, and walks miles up to mountain pastures to cut food for her *pauvres bêtes*, as she calls the two mules, and the goat with its kid that belong to the farm and are tethered close to the house. There was a wood-fire with a great pot hanging above it in the room Madelon brought me into, and in a corner of the wide open hearth sat the old mother, spinning with a distaff and spindle. She laughed till she nearly fell into the fire when she found I had never seen anyone spin before, and that I thought it a wonderful thing; and while I watched her, Madelon brought out wine and raisins and figs of her own drying, and by-and-by slipped away to fetch her father and her uncle, who were at work somewhere among the vines, to come in and look at me, and click their glasses with mine when my health was drunk, before I went away. I have never been made so much of in my life before, and I feel quite elated and

gratified, so you need not be surprised if the orange-tree-house people fill up a good deal of space in my letters.

“There are other beautiful valleys round our château besides this one, but I think I shall continue to love it best. It was the first glimpse I had into Paradise, and Madelon, my first friend, is its Eve. As for the Adam—well—Madelon would go part of the way home with me, and while we were walking by the river, I spied some beautiful fronds of maiden-hair ferns growing on the opposite bank, just where the stream is broadest: while I was exclaiming with vexation that I could not get at them, and Madelon was risking a fall into the water by reaching after them with a crooked stick, ‘*À votre service,*’ said a voice behind us, and the young man with the pruning-hook stepped at one stride from the top of the bank into the middle of the stream. After being instructed by Madelon that it was ‘those green leaves, but, yes—nothing else than those small green leaves the English young lady wanted,’ he gathered them, and presented them to me most politely. I wanted to divide the ferns with Madelon, when Antoine (that is the knight of the pruning-hook’s name), had disappeared among the olive-trees on his own hill, but she did not see it. What did she want with little green leaves of which there were plenty all up the river, and as for M. Antoine—for I

could not help saying a little word about his kindness—what would you have? When one meets so often by accident, on week-days among the vines, and coming away from mass on Sundays, one cannot feel exactly as to a stranger. Yet one thinks of one's parents who have perhaps their thoughts, and their pride, and the Barbou lands were, alas! so much richer than other people's; and since M. Barbou had been elected Maire of the Commune there had been a little misunderstanding, or little jealousy. The two houses on the opposite hills were not on such neighbourly terms as had been the case when the children in them were still children. 'It was sad,' Madelon said, just letting the dimples in her cheeks disappear for a moment, 'but it was so; and one must make up one's mind.'

"Even in Paradise, you see! One need not get among 'countys' and dukes, for opposite houses to have feuds, and Romeo and Juliet stories to spring up.

"I have left very little space in my letter for Madame La Comtesse, which would shock Madelon very much if she knew, yet I assure you, Aunt Rivers and I are getting into a way of discussing her sayings and doings almost as incessantly as the La Roquette people do. What can I tell you about her? She is not the least in the world like Mrs. Kirkman, for one thing, and the court everybody pays her does not exasperate me in the least.

I think even you, Katherine, would take the infection of worship if you were here. Luckily for me, Aunt Rivers is terribly afraid of driving down the steep hill, so it falls on me to return all Madame de Florimel's visits, and be the medium of communication between the two châteaux. Madame is very kind to me, and makes as much of me as if I were Lady Rivers's daughter, instead of her niece. So far away from London you see, she does not take in the immense difference that exists between a West and a Rivers, or perhaps it would not be as much to her as to other people if she did understand it. I can't help enjoying myself, though sometimes I think I must be very selfish to feel so happy just because the sun shines and everybody smiles, while things in Saville Street remain the same as ever. The spring creeps on, not by fits and starts as it does in England, but bringing brighter sunshine and fresh flowers every day. Now it is violets and anemones, by-and-by it will be tulips and gladiolus among the corn, and Madelon has shown me a marshy place by the river where there will be flags and daffodils, but I find these are not so common here as I expected from a remark someone made to me before I came. Still the spring creeps on, and I cannot help being very happy.

"Your loving Friend,

"EMMIE WEST.

"P.S.—There is a likeness of Mr. Anstice in one of the morning-rooms at the great château. I recognised it the moment I got into the room, but I have not said anything yet to Madame de Florimel about our knowing him a little in England. I don't think I ever shall."

"Emmie gives us very little useful information in her letters," observed Mildie discontentedly, when the reading ceased. "She promised to find out for me what kind of frog it is that is eaten in the South of France, and the nature of the Communal Government; but you see, though she actually mentions a maire of the commune, she does not add a single fact that can be called interesting."

"What a sell it is that Emmie should have gone to such a jolly place, instead of Casabianca or me," remarked the Gentle Lamb, reflectively. "Why, I should have been up in the tree with that man she talks of, in half a minute, and I would have followed him into the river, and made him show me where the eels hide, or perhaps turn out a water-rat, and she could do nothing, poor idiot, but stand still and stare. There's no sense in girls travelling, they can do nothing when they get to a place but pick flowers."

"And be happy, even when they leave a sister behind

them in Saville Street," said Christabel, coming forward with a brave smile on her face, and leaning over Katherine's chair. "Yes, I am very much obliged to Emmie for telling me that piece of good news to-night. You may take the letter downstairs now, Mildie, and read it to your mother, for dinner must be over by this time and your father settled to his evening nap, but mind you bring it back to me again. I shall keep it to encourage me," she whispered to Katherine, "till I get just such another happy one of my own. Your flowers and sunshine, when I read of them, will be so much mine, that you will never need to pity Saville Street, as far as I am concerned."

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE CHATEAU GARDENS.

La vie est un voyage,
Tâchons de l'embellir :
Jetons sur son passage
Les roses du plaisir.

Dans l'âge heureux de la jeunesse
L'amour nous flatte, il nous caresse,
Il nous présente le bonheur,
Puis il s'envole ; on voit l'erreur,
Hélas que faire ?
Tâcher de plaire.
Du bien présent savoir jouir
Sans trop songer à l'avenir.

“Yes, yes, my child ; but there are two sides to this question, as to every other, and I have lived so long here, and assisted, as was my duty, in arranging so many marriages, that I have come to feel even a little shocked at an English girl's manner of thinking on these subjects. There is a great deal to be said in favour of trusting to the experience and cooler judgment of parents and elders, who understand, as you young people do not, the large part which suitability of *entourage*—I cannot get the

English word, I am positively forgetting my English—plays in enabling two people to live comfortably together. If a girl were to tell me she had fallen in love, not that any French girl would dream of so terrible an indiscretion, I should recommend her mother to look after her well, and marry her to the most experienced middle-aged man of their acquaintance who was willing to take the responsibility of her guidance. That would be my idea."

"Poor Madelon," said Emmie West, peeping shyly up from under her large shady hat into the face of Madame de Florimel, at whose side she was pacing the broad terrace of the château garden, flanked on each side by orange-trees. "Poor Madelon, then I am afraid I have done more harm than good by confiding my fancies to you. Please don't think that she herself has ever given me any exact ground for them. But when you opened out your plan to me about the *épiciér* from Grasse, who has asked you to find him a wife in the village, and said you were thinking of Madelon, I could not help telling you what I had observed since I came here."

"So, so, it is in thy head, is it, little one, that this pretty romance of the olive-trees has grown up. Thou hast thy little ideas on these subjects, then, it seems."

"Yes, I have," said Emmie, taking courage to look back playfully into the keen, kind eyes that were scruti-

nising her face. "Yes, madame, I have ; but please don't advise my mother to marry me to the first prudent old man who would take the trouble of ruling me. I should not like it at all, and poor mamma would be very much puzzled to know how to set about such an enterprise."

"Precisely, that is the English way, and though, as everybody here is well aware, I am English, and even strongly English in all my habits and prejudices, this one custom of the country, the carelessness of mothers, passes my understanding. If you, my child, had belonged to me, see how it would have been between us. From the first hour of your life I should have watched your heart ; there would have been no opportunity for an idea to enter that had not been shaped by my experience first : then when the hour arrived for settling your destiny in marriage, there could have been no possibility of a conflict between our wills ; you would have had no other thought but to approve my choice. Why has not your mother, who loves you, you say, so dearly, why has not she acted in a similar manner?"

"Poor mamma," cried Emmie ; "if you only knew how many more important things she has to think about than my heart ! Besides, don't you know, in England we think it right to leave all that. It may never come ; and if it does—yes, dear madame, I will say it out, though

you are lifting your eyebrows at me—I do think it must be best to choose a little for one's self, and even to love a little of one's own accord, if one is to marry."

Very delicately marked were the eyebrows that surprise, half feigned, half real, lifted up into a white brow, on which a few lines of age and care were written, lightly as with a fine pencil. And the rest of the face corresponded with the delicacy of these lines; a small aquiline nose; firm, thin lips, that looked more accustomed to open for commands than entreaties; a skin, whose clear fineness had resisted forty-two years of exposure to Southern sunshine, and sixty of life; deep-set grey eyes, with a hint of kindly Northern humour sweetening their habitual keenness; a figure as slim and alert as Emmie's own, which somehow managed quite as remarkably as did the face, to express the combined results of early training and long habit, of English originality and French taste. This combination was particularly visible just now, as Madame de Florimel paused in her walk to look full at Emmie with lifted eyebrows and smiling eyes; her face daintily framed in a becoming French hood, and the skirt of her black silk dress drawn in a careless bunch through her pocket-holes, to set her thickly-soled feet free for the brisk exercise in which she delighted.

"*Ah, voilà,*" she cried merrily, perceiving that her look of pretended surprise was calling fresh and fresh floods of crimson into Emmie's fair face. "We must look a little further into this by-and-by—that little letter of caution to thy mother will have to be written I think—but there precisely at this moment comes Joseph Marie, who can never manage so much as to take the cows out for a walk between the vines, without calling me from talk with my friends. He is beckoning me to come down to the pond to speak with him. I will return soon and finish our discussion."

Emmie followed madame to the end of the terrace, and watched her as she nimbly descended a flight of marble steps that led from the upper garden, where a semblance of effort was maintained to drill the luxuriant vegetation in diamond and heart-shaped beds, to a wilderness below where nature and the advancing spring had taken the matter entirely into their own hands. How lovely the wilderness looked that sunny morning! The borders of prickly-leaved artichokes, between which madame was now picking her way, the strip of green corn flaring with red anemones, the round pond at the bottom of the inclosure where Dr. Urquhart's green frogs were croaking, not in full chorus, indeed, but loud enough to secure that Emmie should never be ignorant of their

existence again, the bed of violets that girdled the pond with a belt of vivid colour, and sent out arrowy perfumes to where Emmie stood. Scent, warmth, colour, strange dissonant music, vivid intense life in air and earth and sky, all seemed to expand Emmie's being into new perceptions of delight, as she stood imbibing them rather than thinking of them, while in her heart there was a curious reaching forth towards something yet to come; something which seemed only an echo of that call of the spring to which nature was responding so ardently.

When madame had disappeared behind the door of the cow-shed, Emmie turned round and walked back towards the château. Shabby and out of repair as the white stone building really was, it looked a dazzling Aladdin's palace of marble in the strong mid-day sunshine, the very weather-stains and the green lizards that were basking here and there on the hot walls, turning themselves into gems for its embellishment that day. Here, too, even in the seldom-used apartments of the west wing, were signs of activity; windows wide open; gay strips of carpet hanging over the railing of a balcony at the far end of the house, into which two of madame's white-capped handmaidens had dragged some ancient gilded chairs and tapestry sofas, and were proceeding to evoke clouds of dust from them with their brooms. Presently Madelon

came through the window on to the balcony to inspect the work, and leaned over to nod and smile at Emmie as she passed below. Madelon, being madame's principal favourite among the village maidens, was generally invited to the château whenever anything unusual was in prospect, and as madame had sent her a summons yesterday on the receipt of a letter from England, she had appeared in the early morning and had since been hovering from attic to cellar, supplementing the exertions of the servants, and welcomed warmly among them, as the sure harbinger of some pleasant interruption to the slow routine of daily life.

Yes, and even beyond the precincts of the château was this breeze of change noted and rejoiced in. By the great iron gates that opened on to the village road, little groups of children kept gathering and scattering, while sometimes an older face looked in between the bars. Now it is old Madame Mül with a great bunch of canes from the river on her head, who stops and nods encouragement and congratulation to the maidens who are dusting that magnificent château furniture, for the astonishment of the guest who is coming from England to-morrow. Now it is M. le Curé himself in his cassock and curled hat, and the village blacksmith with his grimy face and forge apron, who stop to chat and look up at the balcony.

Emmie cannot quite catch their words, but she guesses the cheerful nature of the conversation by the winks and nods and snaps of the fingers that accompany the talk.

"Our dear madame is," so the talk runs, "expecting her English relation to make her a little visit again this spring. What a joy for our good madame, who is so English, and who will naturally rejoice to show her relation some of the fine things he cannot see elsewhere, and of which he will no doubt speak a great deal when he gets back to his own miserable country. And precisely by good fortune, never for several years have the vines, and the olive groves, and the flower fields, of madame been looking so well as just now, nor her *bêtes* so flourishing, nor have her wine and oil cellars and her poultry-yard been so well furnished. Ah, ah, there will be someone who will open his eyes wide by-and-by, at the display made before him of so much prosperity and good management; due it must be confessed principally to the good sense and resolution of that brave Joseph Marie, in carrying out his own plans, and resisting madame's English innovations. Yet, since madame is good to everyone, one would not grudge, one would indeed rejoice heartily with her, in the triumph she is expecting."

Having come to this happy conclusion they moved

on, and another little group formed, of young girls from the river with piled baskets of white linen on their heads, who were still more enthusiastic in their exclamations of delight at the sight of the old furniture, and the prospect of a guest at the château. The whole place was bubbling over with festivity, and somehow the rejoicing did not seem exaggerated to Emmie, considering who it was that was coming to-morrow, with news from home, (her Saville Street letters had spoken of a visit he had made there lately for the purpose of carrying the last intelligence to her), and what sort of a look,—joyful or sorrowful,—would be on the speaking face that seemed to answer to her thoughts and interpret them as no other had ever done.

Emmie turned at the end of the terrace and walked back to meet Madame de Florimel, now approaching from the lower garden, and as she buried her face in a bunch of daffodils, she wondered whether a really sensible person, whether Katherine Moore herself in like circumstances, could help feeling as foolishly happy as she felt just then. Madame, who seldom troubled herself to gather flowers, having long since had a surfeit of them, appeared, however, at the top of the marble steps with three or four primroses and a cowslip between her fingers, poor little withered blooms, the

only shabby ones in the garden, which she had gathered behind the cow-shed in a shady spot where the roots had been planted long ago. Her eyes were fixed upon them when Emmie joined her, and the expression of her face had a very unusual touch of melancholy.

"See," she said, "how unhappy my English prim-roses look in the grand company they find themselves among. Wynyard Anstice brought them from the woods at Leigh, the last time he came here with his uncle. But I made a mistake in asking for them; I might have known well enough that living things transplanted from one country to another never come to much good, or are happy."

"Madame—but you, madame," cried Emmie, surprised by her quick sympathy into answering to the thought instead of the words of her companion.

Madame was not at all accustomed to being understood better than she intended, and being talkative by nature, had fallen into a habit of indulging in spoken reveries, which, with Madelon or the good curé by her side, had brought no other inconvenience than that of confirming her companions in their chronic contempt for madame's English ideas. She turned rather sharply to look at Emmie now, but could find nothing to alarm or offend her in the sweet wistfulness with which the

girl's reverential eyes were trying to read her face. Had she not lately been saying, that had Providence blessed her with a daughter like this, there should only be one heart and one soul between them, and indeed——

A swift thought darted through madame's inventive brain, so delicious to her that it nearly drove away the sad reflections that had occupied her during her progress up the garden; then, seeing as by a flash of lightning how the two trains of thought, the sad and the joyful, might be made to fit into each other, she grasped after the fleeting melancholy, and said, musingly, as she laid the stalks of her English flowers together in a bouquet :

“Ah, my child, the sight of these flowers has brought my thoughts back to the subject we were discussing when I was called away: the question of how the great event in a girl's life should be conducted. You think it strange in me, so entirely English as I am in all my principles, to have adopted French notions on the subject of forming marriages, but I followed your plan when I was young, my child. I chose for myself, and having given up all other ties for the man whose society I believed enough for my happiness, I have lived a very solitary life in this place for forty years. Yes, it is nearly forty years since I began to

spend my time chiefly alone here, with affectionate neighbours and occupations, but alone, as you see."

"M. le Comte died, then, so soon after your marriage?" said Emmie.

"He died at Monaco two years ago, my child, of a sudden seizure at the gaming-table, where he had long been accustomed to spend his nights and days. We had different ideas, different habits, a different faith. I occupied myself with his interests to the last, and I have done my best to save something out of the ruin he made, for my son—to create an existence for him, which he will perhaps appreciate when I am gone."

"Ah, you have your son."

"For two or three years of his childhood I had him, but he was educated apart from me, and in growing up he has removed himself further and further from my influence. He is an ardent Catholic, and his spiritual advisers do not advocate his spending much of his time with an English mother. I have only twice seen his wife and child. I am a lonely old woman, as you see, and when I am not occupied with my *ménage* and my farming, I fall to speculating on the difference it would have made in my own life, and in some other lives, if I had taken my father's and mother's advice, and accepted the husband they had planned for me."

Emmie's sympathetic eyes asked for more; and madame, laughing, as she lightly struck her cheek with the bouquet she had arranged to her mind by this time, went on:

"Ah, what a lover of love stories we have here. You will not be content, I see, till you have drawn the whole history out of me; and you are wondering how a girl of eighteen—your own age, I think,—came already to have two lovers."

"No," said Emmie, quickly, "for the girl of eighteen was you."

"So an English girl can make a pretty speech, or has she learned it already from Madelon? However, the second suitor in my estimation was no great conquest, and I don't think it ever came into my head to consider him a lover at all. He was my cousin, a certain Wynyard Anstice whom I had known all my life, in my baby days as a big, teasing, over-affectionate schoolboy, and afterwards as a grave young man, who came to our house at regular intervals, and was always more and more intent on matters that did not interest me, and more and more tiresomely determined to thrust himself and them on my notice."

"Was he at all like the relation, the Mr. Wynyard Anstice, who is coming here to-morrow? But no, there cannot be any likeness."

"Why not?" asked madame, raising her eyebrows again. "Relations are alike sometimes. However, you are right in your guess; the present Wynyard Anstice does not get his good looks or his pleasant ways from our side of the house, though he is an Anstice at the bottom, and can even remind me of his uncle when he turns obstinate. My cousin Wynyard was an eldest son, and his father was a rich man, while mine, though the head of the family, was absolutely poor for our station. Titled poverty has been my lot through life, and I have learned to accustom myself to its straits and its unsubstantial dignities, till I doubt whether I could accommodate myself to anything else. Even then, I had imbibed a certain contempt for my uncle, because he had early in life married the daughter of a wealthy trading family, and allowed his name to be associated with theirs in the business from which their riches were drawn; and when the eldest son showed a real talent for affairs, and threw himself with energy into the pursuits of his mother's family, all his chance of success with me was over for ever. I was a foolish, wilful girl, as I said before, and I had my way; sometimes, in my lonely hours, I amuse myself by figuring the life I might have had if my mother had had hers. It would not have been all roses,

any more than this is, but there would have been perhaps greater compensations. I should have lived among old friends, and during the greater part of my middle life in my own childhood's home, for my only brother died soon after my father, and the Leigh estates, such as they were, came to my cousin, who lived in the old house till he died."

"And never married?"

"But not for love of me. Misfortunes follow some people, and my cousin was destined to suffer from a much deeper heart-wound than any I gave him. The winter after my brother's death, he came to La Roquette to pay me a long visit. There were matters of business to discuss between us, and I think he found a certain satisfaction in seeing how things were here, and in bringing his once-despised acuteness to my aid, using it to protect me from some of the worst consequences of the position in which I had placed myself. That year the *maisonnette* on the hill was fitted up, and I invited a dear English friend with her daughter to spend the first winter in it. The daughter was a charming girl, thoroughly English, but of a type I had not seen before, full of little enthusiasms and notions which she would quite forget herself in defending. I was French enough then to be doubtful of my friend's wisdom in having allowed her

daughter to run beyond her so far, but my grave elderly cousin was thoroughly bewitched, over head and ears in love, after the second morning of arguing and dawdling together up and down this terrace. I confess I used my influence with the mother and the young girl, to give matters the turn he wished, feeling that I owed my cousin something. It was one of the few mistakes in that way I have ever made in my life. They were engaged in this garden. Ah me! I can see them coming up the marble steps together, he all radiant, and eager to tell me of his success, and she blushing and smiling at the thought of the pleasure the news would give to her mother and me. But it did not answer. On closer acquaintance she grew alarmed at his imperious temper, that clashed perpetually with her ideas, and soon after they returned to England she jilted him to marry the younger of his two half-brothers, young men who had grown up since I left England, and to whom my elder cousin had acted the part of a father."

"This girl and the young brother were Mr. Wynyard Anstice's father and mother then?"

"You have guessed it. That is his special link with me, and indeed he is the only one of my English relations in the younger generation that I trouble myself to keep up an acquaintance with. I can't help clinging to him, and

the attraction seems mutual; for here, after rather a long interval, and without any pressing of mine, he comes proposing to spend a few weeks with me. It will bring a crowd of old recollections to have him here again, with those looks and ways that have so much of his mother in them. An unlucky resemblance, for it has cost him a fortune already. His parents both died in India a few years after their marriage, and left him a legacy to his uncle's care, with, I believe, a great many professions of repentance for their past conduct towards him. The old man behaved very well, and accepted the charge of the child, reluctantly at first, but growing fond of him by degrees, and treating him in all respects like a son. I was glad when I saw what a fine handsome boy the little Wynyard was, not so like his mother as to awaken painful recollections, but with a great deal of her brightness and sweetness of nature.

“For some years it seemed as if my cousin had at last succeeded in binding one living creature to himself; and I hearing of it, and seeing it, for the two paid several visits here together, rejoiced that the doom of utter solitude had not come upon us both, that a little bit of natural cheerfulness and family love had visited my old home once more. It did very well while Wynyard was a boy, for he has a fine temper, and so long as there was

only the question of yielding his wishes in every-day matters, his bright good humour made all easy ; but when the time came for him to think for himself, and he developed the same tendency to take up enthusiasms his mother had had, then—well, I understood the conflict that followed, better it may be than anyone else. It was affection, intensified by recollections of past pain, quite as much as a tyrannical temper, that made my poor cousin resent so bitterly the differences of opinion that grew up between himself and his darling when the boy approached manhood. If Wynyard could have agreed with him on every point, and fallen in with all his prejudices, he would have felt himself avenged, so to speak, of the old desertion ; but when the one person he had allowed himself to love in his latter years chose to think and act for himself in a manner directly opposed to his judgment, all his former affection turned to gall, and he seemed to lose even his sense of justice.”

“ Did he die unforgiving ? ” asked Emmie, anxiously.

“ It was a seizure at the last. Wynyard was sent for, and the other nephew, who is now Lord Anstice, and they were both with him for the last week of his life. He recovered consciousness a few hours before the end, and seemed pleased, so Wynyard told me, to see him near, speaking to him as of old, as if there had never been any

quarrel. But if he remembered the injustice he had committed, and wished to undo it, it was too late then. Wynyard, at all events, was not one to allow last moments to be disturbed with thoughts of worldly possessions. It had always been supposed that the large fortune my cousin inherited from his father would go to Wynyard, and that the other nephew would have the Anstice estates, which had greatly increased in value under my cousin's management. When the will came to be read, however, it was found that Wynyard's name was left out, and that the whole of the property went to the other nephew, an idle young man, who had never been a favourite with his uncle till just at the last, when he took him up, to punish Wynyard for his independence. Wynyard makes very light of the disappointment, professing to think it only fair that he should be left to abide by the principles he had chosen, and prove that he understood what he was about when he said they were sufficient for him. All that is beyond me—belonging indeed to regions of thought into which I do not profess to have entered—and I suppose I ought to be glad to see my father's title in the way of being properly supported at last; but I don't think I am. I like the old simplicity and the dignity that owed nothing to wealth, and I can't escape feeling as if the injustice done to Wynyard may be

traced back to influence I exercised here, in walks up and down this terrace long ago. If I had not planned a little too eagerly just that once in my life, matters might have adjusted themselves more smoothly. The two young people who married afterwards would have met and liked each other all the same, doubtless, but there would have been no previous promise to make their love a treachery to the elder brother,—or they would never have met, and my cousin would have divided his possessions justly among his heirs, uninfluenced by old loves and grudges. But forgive me, my child, I have been talking to myself instead of to you for the last ten minutes. It is a bad habit I have fallen into through living so much alone. Excuse me.”

Emmie’s face did not suggest the need of any apology, but Madame de Florimel was no longer looking at it; her eyes had for some time been fixed on a distant part of the garden, as if she had been calling up recollections of vanished figures to people it with.

“I live so much alone,” she continued, “that when I am walking up and down here, I fall into a way of following out my own thoughts. It is among the old days that I live, instead of in the present, fancying how this and that might have been, if one or the other person had acted differently, or if circumstances had occurred other-

wise than they did. Ah, well; but now you see, my child, our argument is ended. I have told you a chapter out of my own history, all *à propos* of Madelon's prospects, to convince you that you had better leave her parents and myself to settle her marriage. If my friend, the Grasse *épiciér*, whom I have long known, and with whose affairs I am well acquainted, should approve himself to us elders, you young ones will do well to acquiesce in our decision. It is a tangled web, my child, this life that we are all in, and it needs experienced hands to lay thread and thread together. Ah, here comes Madelon to tell us that the *charette* is waiting to take you back to the *maisonnette*. You have made this morning of waiting pass pleasantly, my child, and you must not forget to express my gratitude to your good aunt for sparing you to me. It is an amiable person, this Lady Rivers, though somehow or other I—but what am I about, maundering to myself again? I must have entered my dotage to-day. Let us go and see if Madelon has remembered to put the flowers I gathered for your aunt under the *charette* seat."

CHAPTER VIII.

RED ANEMONES.

Lo! in the middle of the wood,
The folded leaf is wooed from out the bud.

THE bright sunshiny mornings did not always bring Emmie West such long leisure as she had enjoyed in the château garden when Madame de Florimel had confided to her a chapter of her early history. Even to the pretty *maisonnette* on the side of the hill, there would come every now and then dark days, and there was sure to be one hour in each day, when Emmie was tempted to wish herself back in dingy Saville Street, finding that uninterrupted sunshine out of doors did not quite make up for gloom inside the house. Entire days of discomfort occurred whenever a badly-cooked dinner, or a suspicion that Madame la Comtesse had singled out Emmie for attentions due to someone else, aggravated Lady Rivers into a state of temper that refused rest to herself or anyone under her control.

The hour of trial that came with each day was caused by Lady Rivers's impatience to get her letters, and was spent in weary watching for the approach of the *facteur* down the steep road that connected La Roquette with the little mountain town which was its nearest point of contact with a world concerning itself with letters.

The eagerness of the present inhabitants of the little château to have their share of news at a particular hour of the day was an ever-recurring surprise and scandal to the cheery old *facteur*. He was accustomed to place the weekly newspaper, or the rare letter he brought to the scattered farm-houses he visited in his rounds, on the topmost door-step, or on the wooden ledge where the *marmites* dried themselves under the kitchen window, and to leave them there to greet the eyes of their owners when they returned in the evening from their day's work among their olives and vines. He did not know how to shrug his shoulders high enough in contempt of people who wasted good daylight in watching on their door-step for his arrival, as Emmie West watched every day. Though he was too true a Frenchman not to have a smile and a polite word of excuse ready when the eyes that watched and reproached him for his delays were as pretty as

Emmie's, he could not reconcile himself to having his right to take his *déjeuner* leisurely by the road-side so questioned.

To people who passed the entire day in doing nothing, what could it matter at what hour they had their letters? Madame la Comtesse was more reasonable, and far from requiring her budget at a particular time of the day, allowed him to spare himself the long descent into her valley, and to leave her letters at the *maisonnette* to be carried down the hill by one of the farm people at their leisure. Why should anyone be more particular than madame, and, above all, what could one want with so many letters every day? Two, four, half-a-dozen.

The *facteur* could not restrain a glance of curiosity darting from his dark southern eyes, as he counted these numbers, day after day, into Emmie's hand. A little joke about a "*bien-aimé*" hovered on his lips, which never, however, got itself said, for Emmie, though accessible enough at other times, always looked grave when she was taking in the letters.

Who could say what aggravations to temper for Aunt Rivers might not be folded up in one or another of them?

She generally remained for a moment on the steps

outside, shading her eyes with her hand, and looking after the *facteur* till he had passed the hedge of roses now full of pink blooms, at the bottom of the garden, just to refresh herself with as much sunshine as possible, before turning back to the house to confront Lady Rivers with a handful of fateful letters.

Madame's valley, with all its scattered dwellings, lies spread out like a panorama at her feet. The groups of houses she spies from her high station, here, by a red roof in a bosquet of grey olives, there, by a thin column of smoke rising through the thick, high canes that border the river; these all contain friends, and have associations for Emmie now. She knows who owns that group of fig-trees, whose branches hold up buds like delicate green cups, high in the air; whose is the orchard of quince and almond at the opening of the valley; and to whom belongs the vineyard on the other side of the winding road, where the dwarf vines have clothed themselves promisingly with downy leaves, and clusters with a good smell. Ah, the winter is over and done indeed; "the fig-tree puts forth her leaves, the vines have a good smell;" and Emmie's heart to-day adds softly to the ancient spring-tide love song—"and he has come."

Down there in the great white house all bathed in

sunshine, he opened his eyes this morning on all this beauty, and perhaps to-day——

But what is Emmie doing, keeping Lady Rivers waiting so long for her six letters? The glow fades from her face as she turns to enter the hushed, shaded house, where as much as possible of the freshness and brightness is shut out to suit the invalid's fancies; bent, Emmie sometimes thinks, on depriving herself of the advantages they have come so far to seek, and on bringing as much of the excitement of her London life about her, as she can lay hold of under the circumstances. Emmie puts it down to the worry of expecting and reading these daily letters, that her aunt's cheek has not lost its hectic flush, and that her nightly sleeplessness and morning cough have scarcely at all abated. She even took it on herself to suggest to Alma that the letters from Eccleston Square had better for the future be written more carefully, but the caution did not avail. Lady Rivers fretted so much more at not receiving full descriptions of all the Kirkman parties, that the old practice of giving full details had to be resumed; and Emmie again spent the greater part of the fresh sunny mornings in reading aloud accounts of London gaieties which Alma dutifully despatched day by day for her mother's consolation during her

exile from all such delights. These narrations, to Emmie's ears, sounded pleasant enough, and seemed to set forth a very prosperous state of things. She never got quite to understand what were the jarring notes, or why certain names and sentences should bring a quick gasp in her aunt's breathing, and that frightened, baffled look in her eyes, so painful to see.

"Lawrence! Are you quite sure the name is Lawrence? You read so carelessly, Emmie, my dear. It could not possibly be young Lawrence with whom Constance went to the Opera while Sir John was laid up with a sore throat. Look again. Ah, yes, as you say, Alma was there too, but then Alma must have given up her engagement for the Kirkmans' great dinner on Horace's birthday—given it up, too, at the last moment. How could Constance be so wilful? What are they all thinking of? There would be two places vacant at the Kirkmans' dinner-table! Sir Francis would not dine there without Alma; he would not sacrifice himself so far as that. I know him. It's a selfish world, Emmie, my dear, and we poor mothers who are ready to do anything, *anything* for our children's good, must see the plans we have toiled ourselves to death to carry out, defeated by other people's folly and selfishness. There, you had better go away and open

your own letter. You have been peeping under the envelope all the time I have been talking. Nobody ever does seem to see my anxieties, or care for what I suffer." Then a great tear would gather in the faded, fevered eyes, and falling, blot out young Lawrence's obnoxious name on Alma's sheet.

It certainly did appear hard to Lady Rivers to find that old enemy of hers, whom she believed she had so thoroughly routed and crushed long ago, starting up in her path again with power to put obstacles in the way of her present projects, even if still sorer heartburnings and terrors in the future need not be foreboded from his reappearance on the scene. More frequently, however, it was the omission of a name in Alma's letters that troubled her.

"Is that all, Emmie?" she would ask. "Are you sure? Let us look through the crossing again. Another long letter without a word of Horace Kirkman in it! Of course when a girl like Alma is engaged, one does not expect her to dwell much upon her feelings and—that sort of thing; but I should like to know at least how often he calls, she might tell me *so much*, I think, and whether she is pleased with the presents he brings her. Let me recollect—yes—it is a long time, more than a week, since Alma mentioned Horace in her letter, and

then she spoke almost, I thought, as if she had been annoyed with him for sending her such an expensive valentine. You would not think it a serious fault in a lover—the not knowing how to make you handsome enough presents, would you, Emmie? You would be grateful for such an elegant valentine as Alma found fault with, now would you not?”

“I don’t know,” answered Emmie, reluctant to contradict, yet unable to rest under the imputation of admiring Mr. Horace Kirkman’s style of courtship. “If I liked a person *very* much, I suppose I should not mind his giving me useless things that cost a great deal of money, however silly I might think it.”

“Ah, well,” said Lady Rivers, coldly, “you are not likely to be tried in that way, my dear. Your lover, if ever you have one, will probably not have money to spend on useless presents, so it is quite as well that you should not acquire a taste for them. You may read me any part of your mother’s letter that is interesting enough to take my thoughts from my own troubles. I know she is grateful to me for all my goodness to you and to Aubrey, and it soothes me to hear what she says about how badly you would both have been situated but for me.”

Then Emmie glanced breathlessly down the pages of

her letter for one of those meek sentences about "My obligations to dear Aunt Rivers for giving you such a happy winter," with which Mrs. West did not fail to sprinkle her epistles, or for some harmless home incident that could be read out without revealing the family straits too plainly. For Emmie was inconsistent enough to resent that little taunt about the probable poverty of her future lover, and even to feel it keenly, though she did hate the Kirkmans so much, and though her dear Countess had imbued her with a greater contempt than ever for vulgar wealth. She was seldom, however, allowed to read far without interruption.

"Dr. Urquhart has given Mildie tickets for some lectures on Physics, and Mrs. Urquhart has promised to take her to the first lecture in the doctor's brougham," she began.

"Physic! what a disagreeable subject for a lecture," Lady Rivers struck in, "if Mildie had to take as much as I, she would not care to hear it lectured about. However, I am glad the Urquharts pay so much attention to Mildie, it looks well." Emmie, finding that her cheeks were tingling under her aunt's meaning smile, dashed headlong into another subject.

"Mamma took her watch the other day to—to—
Oh, that is not interesting."

"Go on, my dear, it interests me. Your mother wears the old watch still that she had when she married; mine was worn out ages ago, but I observe I never get such good things as other people. Your mother's watch wanted mending then, at last?"

"It was not that, exactly," hesitated Emmie. "She took her watch to an old watchmaker, a friend of the Moores, and she says he was very kind and liberal to her about it,—but here is something much better worth reading down here, about the Moores. Christabel is not going to Zürich at Easter after all—Katherine finds she cannot get lodgings, so Christabel is to remain in Saville Street all the summer. Mamma is very glad, and so is Mildie, though they don't appear to see much of Christabel now. She is out a great deal, and has made many new friends. Old David Macvie, the watchmaker, complained of this to mamma, and was quite in low spirits because she so seldom has time to visit him."

"An old watchmaker! Why should anyone visit him? I don't think I care to hear any more, my dear. You may open a crack of the jalousies now. I think I could bear a little more light, and that I might look at the illustrated paper dear Mrs. Kirkman has sent me again this week without hurting my head. Perhaps I shall find an account of their dinner-party on Horace's

birthday. It will amuse me very well to look at that, and you may send Ward with my afternoon tea and go out for a little while, if you like."

The permission was always joyfully received, but never, perhaps, quite so eagerly as on the afternoon of the last recorded conversation, just two days after Emmie's visit to the château garden. She lingered after her dismissal only long enough to summon Ward to her duties, and snatch her own shady hat from its peg in the hall. Then she ran down the steep steps into the flower-garden, and drew a deep breath to blow away any lingering flavour of Kirkman entertainments, or depressing views of human nature that might hang about her, contradicting the sunny beauty of the outside world into which she had emerged, and the joyous hope in her heart that responded to it.

Hush, hush! She paused in tying her hat-strings, and then ran swiftly down the steep garden path between rows of sweetly-smelling beans, till she reached the point where the hill dipped steeply towards the ravine, and there she stood still to listen again. The cicadas and the green frogs were making a little less noise than usual. Above their harsh voices, and above the tinkle of the distant rivulet, Emmie distinguished three clear liquid notes coming from an almond-tree halfway down the near side of the hill.

Ah, and now three other notes, liquid sweet, answer from beyond the river. Again the call, and the loving, sweet reply.

Emmie had never heard a nightingale's voice in her life, and had hitherto looked on nightingales as a half mythical kind of bird known chiefly to poets; but she does not doubt their identity to-day, for Madelon had told her that nightingales would sing all day and all night in the valley when spring had really come, and had not spring come completely since yesterday? She smiled to think how many quotations would have risen to Mildie's lips on such an occasion, while she herself could not recall one good enough. "Most musical, most melancholy." Oh no, no! not melancholy at all. English nightingales might be melancholy singing at night in solemn cathedral closes; but that one in the almond-tree on the hill, singing in the hot, hot sunshine, with a cloudless sky overhead and countless flowers below, was so happy, and had so much to say to his love in the orange grove on the opposite slope, that he did not know how to hurry out his notes fast enough. Emmie would not disturb the sweet talk by walking through the coppice, so she turned up the hill, and determined to take another and longer route to the orange-tree house where she had promised Madelon to call that afternoon.

The open road winding on the ridge of the hill has advantages which Emmie has learned to appreciate by this time. As she climbs, she stops to rest every now and then, and looking backward, sees a wide view spread out at her feet, so that no doings in the distant village could escape her. If Joseph Marie, for example, had brought the *charette* round to the principal door of the château, Emmie would have seen it dwarfed to the size of a toy chariot, with mice for horses, and Joseph Marie no bigger than a frog for a charioteer. But no, there is nothing unusual going on at the château. The diminished courtyard and gardens lie open in their usual sleepy afternoon stillness to the glaring sunshine; not a figure stirring, the *jalousies* all closed, and the straight avenues between the orange-trees and the magnolias quite empty. There is nothing to be seen in the village street either, but a few women with their water-jugs or their linen-baskets on their heads. Farther away, however, Emmie descries a strange vehicle emerging from the lower entrance to Madelon's valley; yes, a strange vehicle—not madame's *charette*, or any *charette* belonging to the village. Can it be that the threatened grocer from Grasse has already been paying a visit to the orange-tree house in this formal style?

Emmie's curiosity was sufficiently aroused to induce

her to quicken her pace. By the time she reached the path leading down into Madelon's valley, she had lost sight of the village and gained a yet wider horizon. More and more valleys, more and more olive-crowned hills; further and further away patches of parti-coloured fields, showing like fairy gardens in the golden afternoon light; and furthest of all, between the opening heights on the far horizon, another blue,—deeper, more dazzling than the blue overhead,—a moving, living radiance, the blue of the Mediterranean melting and losing itself in the trembling sky-line.

It was almost a rest to turn into the green darkness of the pine-wood after looking at so much light, and Emmie made her way quickly to the head of the valley, where a tiny mountain rivulet burst from the rocky hill-side and began its course through the ravine. A flock of sheep and goats, conducted by a young shepherdess, followed her down the steep; and for years afterwards, whenever Emmie thought of La Roquette, it was that particular scene and its accompanying sounds and sensations that came vividly back to her. The tinkling of the sheep bells; the gurgle of the rivulet through ferns and mosses that choked its shallow bed; the little shepherdess's shrill voice calling her dog; deep evening stillness but for these sounds, and a sense of solitude

greater even than had been felt on the lonely road with its wide views. Here there was only the dark vista of the pine-wood she had passed through, the sheltering hill-sides all around her, the depths of shadowy verdure at her feet, and, above all, a glowing line of crimson light where the height from whence she had descended caught the rays of the setting sun.

Her heart echoed back the peace, the joyful calm, with which the little valley, from its crowning crimson height to its cool emerald depths, overflowed. All within her was in harmony with the outside serenity then. Then, but never again completely in all her future life; for, in looking back, she counted that evening as the last of her unconscious girlish days, the point after which she began to have a stake of her own—a private life or death stake in existence. “When I was a girl,” always afterwards meant for Emmie West the years lying behind that evening’s walk through the valley. She was, however, quite innocent of any grave reflections at the time, and had not the least idea when she turned her back on the pine-wood, and took the narrow foot-path by the river, that she was walking into her womanhood, and leaving something behind her there, to which she would look back regretfully as long as she lived.

She was thinking of Madelon as she hastened on,

wondering what o'clock it was, and whether she should be so fortunate as to meet her at her washing-shed, and be spared the long delays which a formal call at the orange-tree house always involved.

The washing-shed consisted of a few stakes driven into the river bank, and overlaid with trailing vines and gourds, which someone (Madelon never particularised further) had put up and adorned for her special accommodation last summer. It had looked like a mere heap of stakes in the early spring, but now a few downy vine leaves and gourd-shoots were opening themselves out to show the kind of trellis-work that would roof it by-and-by, and in this recess, according to her wishes, Emmie came upon Madelon.

For once in her life, she was not at work, but standing with her hands in her apron, looking up at the budding branches over her head. Emmie called her, and her face relaxed into smiles and dimples, when she saw who was near.

"Ah, Mademoiselle Emmé, how I have wanted you," and then came greeting kisses on each cheek, and an eager acceptance on Madelon's part of Emmie's proposal, that they should finish the walk to the little château through the coppice together.

"I have so wished to see mademoiselle," Madelon

repeated several times, glancing with quite unwonted shyness into Emmie's face as they walked along the river path together.

"But you saw me the day before yesterday, Madelon."

"Ah, yes, mademoiselle, but it already seems long ago; things happen of which, perhaps, I ought not to speak; but mademoiselle is so kind, and she has besides a look in her eyes that will draw the words from my lips, I know, before we have been long together."

"Then you may as well begin to tell me at once, Madelon."

Instead of beginning, Madelon looked cautiously round; they were surely quite alone and safe from listeners in this secluded part of the valley, Emmie urged. No, not so utterly alone it seemed; sounds of someone at work high up among the olives on the opposite slope of the hill, might be heard if one listened, as Madelon had evidently been listening a minute or two ago—the ring of an axe, and a strong man's voice singing at intervals.

"It is Antoine," said Madelon, "at work always, late as it is, mademoiselle sees. There is no young man in the neighbourhood who has more courage for work, or is a better son; but what avails it all, if people quarrel and misunderstand each other? Ah, mademoiselle, I speak

because my heart is full. Let us climb by this path towards the little château, and when we are in the *bosquet*, I shall be able to tell mademoiselle a little of what I am feeling."

"Yes," Madelon began, when the shelter of the wood was gained, and there was no voice any longer to be heard but the nightingale's singing very loud and clear from a fig-tree: "Yes, I am very unhappy to-day. Madame la Comtesse is so kind to me, you' see, so kind, even concerning herself like a mother to plan a future for me, and yet, alas! I cannot be as grateful to her as I ought."

And then, as they slowly threaded the tangled path in the ever-deepening gloom, Emmie found herself listening to the first love-story that had ever been told her at first hand.

The great stress of the trouble so far as Madelon's words showed it at first, lay in the fact that madame's kindness should be in the way of being so unworthily appreciated by one who owed her so much gratitude; but Emmie, who could not feel greatly moved on this account, began to see something else behind all these words, as the talk went on, and Madelon, twisting her apron-strings round and round her fingers as shyly as an English girl, fell into digressions and reminiscences that

had less and less to do with madame's share of the grievance. That story of the fierce dog that used to guard the oil-mill on the way to the school-house, which Madelon had never dared to pass, all through her school-days, without Antoine's holding her hand; the *fête* day when they had walked in procession together; incidents of other memorable *fête* days—down to that late one when, under the chestnut-trees, in the village *place*, Antoine had even talked of speaking soon to his father and mother, urging that though they were both so young, something should be settled lest other plans should be thought of by the elders for either of them.

“And now,” Madelon concluded, “to think that the danger which seemed distant then should have arrived, and that madame herself should have brought it about! Madame, whose preference has been my pride and Antoine's boast all our lives—Ah,” Madelon choked herself with a great sob as she tried to draw back into her first entrenchments—“Ah, it is terrible to feel so little gratitude towards madame, when she has, as my mother points out, given me a crowning proof of her good opinion; going so far as even to choose a husband for me. It is my inability to feel rightly towards madame that weighs upon my conscience—it is that truly.”

"But does not your mother know about Antoine?" asked Emmie. "Cannot she help you?"

"Three months ago," answered Madelon, sorrowfully, "my mother was favourable, and also his mother; or you will easily believe, mademoiselle, that those little words under the chestnut-trees would not have been spoken; but there has since been that *maudite* quarrel between our fathers all about nothing, and my mother resents the hard words that have been spoken. She has her pride, and why should she not? She does not choose that our family should be treated with disrespect by neighbours a little while ago no richer or more thought of than ourselves, and—at such a moment—ah, mademoiselle, to think of M. Bouchillon coming to ask me of my parents, in a *charette* handsomer even than the one in which madame drives to the English church, and also that he has brought a present of a Paris clock to my mother; and it was only last Sunday afternoon, after vespers, that he made my acquaintance. My poor Antoine! What chance is there for him against a man of such solid pretensions as that? He does not know what has happened yet, or he would not have been singing over his work on the hill as mademoiselle heard just now. But what can he think, what can he hope, when he hears?"

"He will be very unhappy?"

"*Il m'aime*," said Madelon, simply.

"And you, Madelon?" asked Emmie. She knew well enough already; but some demon of sympathetic curiosity impelled her to try to get a nearer view of this half-unknown, half-strangely familiar thing of which they were talking.

Madelon put her much-tortured apron up to her eyes.

"Mademoiselle must pray for me," she faltered, "that my heart may be brought to respond with suitable gratitude to the wishes of madame and my parents."

"But for yourself, Madelon; have you no doubts about your own wishes? M. Bouchillon and his solid pretensions don't tempt you at all?"

"But no, mademoiselle—when one loves, when one has loved from one's childhood—you understand, mademoiselle."

"Yes," said Emmie softly. "It is beautiful I think to love so. I will pray for you, Madelon, but I shall pray that your parents, and madame too, may come to think as you do about this, and that you may be happy with the one who has loved you all your life. I would not give him up, I think, if I were you—no, I am sure I would not."

"Ah, mademoiselle is English," said Madelon, shaking

her head—but her hand stole out from under her apron and clasped Emmie's, and the two girls walked on together to the end of the wood, holding hands in a silent sympathy which each felt could not be made more perfect by further explanations, though before many minutes were over their thoughts had sundered, and each was following out her own dream in a very different track.

"If Alma had been true-hearted, like this French girl," Emmie was thinking, "how happy her life might have been. What a beautiful love she would have had."

The gate at the end of the wood opened close to the brow of the hill, and as they approached, it looked like a gate of ebony standing out against the sky where the after-glow was burning still. For a moment Emmie's eyes were dazzled. The change from the wood to the open hill-top was like a coming out from night into daylight again, but as soon as she recovered her sight she perceived a figure leaning over the garden railings among the rose-trees, and her heart gave a great foolish bound, just as if she had not been thinking of *that person* all the time she had been in the wood, and had not hoped through every minute of her long walk that *he* would be there when she came back. The perverse, self-teasing spirit that had sent her so far away on that particular

afternoon had been exorcised by Madelon's talk—and she knew, and now confessed to herself, what a bitter, bitter disappointment it would have been if he had not waited till she came back.

Wynyard caught sight of her just as she reached the gate, and leaping the rose-hedge, met her as she came through. His face looked quite radiant with the glow of the sunset, and the pleasant consciousness that he was the bearer of welcome news, and half unconsciously he held out both hands and took Emmie's hands, flowers and all, into their grasp.

"Did I not tell you," he cried, "that we should meet on a hill-side, when you would be more at home here than I? But how is it that you did not expect me? Had you forgotten that I was to come to-day, with my pockets full of letters and parcels from Saville Street, or have you become indifferent to letters, like the rest of the people here? But for these red anemones in your hands, which betray your English love of gathering, I should say you looked naturalized already—as if you were part of the place."

If he meant to say, part of the glowing sunset, part of the rich, sweet beauty of the hill-top, and of the golden evening, Emmie's looks would not have contradicted his thought; and though the enigmatical words

conveyed nothing to her ear, she could not miss the look of half-surprised playful admiration that went with them. He had always hitherto seen her grave or embarrassed, a little ashamed of her dress, a little puzzled or troubled about one thing or another.

This ardent, blushing, happy face, lifted up towards him, radiant with health and welcome, and reflecting harmonious surroundings only, was quite a new revelation.

"I hoped you would come. I knew you would have a great deal to tell me about Saville Street," Emmie said. "And of course I want to hear."

He turned with her, and they had reached the rose-fence before Emmie recollected that she had not said good-bye to Madelon; that they had not spoken since those bold words of encouragement to constancy had passed between them in the wood, and she did not like to part without a farewell. Madelon would think it cold-hearted.

"One minute," she said to Wynyard, "wait one minute; I will be back before you have time to unfasten that little gate among the beans through which we must go into the garden, for I have too much respect for madame's roses to jump over them as you did just now."

Madelon was still standing at the entrance of the wood, and there was a very meaning look on her face when she raised it for Emmie's good-night salutation.

"Ah, but mademoiselle is very happy!" she whispered a little grudgingly. "Everything settles itself so well for *her* future, as one can see. The relation of madame, who comes to her with a message from her mother, and one so handsome, so noble-looking. Ah, mademoiselle, why did you not then tell me a little?"

"No, no, Madelon, you are mistaken—you must not think *that*, indeed."

"But, yes, mademoiselle; when a young man like that comes to one from one's mother, there cannot be a mistake; there is only one thing to think. But I will be silent till mademoiselle gives me permission to speak. I will merely comfort myself now and then by thinking of the happiness that is coming to madame, and to the whole village, when we are allowed to share her satisfaction in such a beautiful arrangement."

There was no use in arguing the point with Madelon, even if Emmie had had breath to argue such a matter. She turned away and walked to the little gate among the beans very slowly, though Wynyard was waiting for her there. She wanted to still the pulses that throbbed in her ears above the nightingale's song, and to bring her trembling lips into order before she asked for those Saville Street letters, but she did not say to herself that it was longing for news of home that agitated her. Emmie

had believed such excuses hitherto, but she knew now that she should never be able to delude herself again with her old devices. Something in Madelon's talk, or in her own thoughts since—or was it the nightingale's songs, or the breath of the sweet evening?—had brought strange revelations and stirrings of heart: something, at all events, had torn the veil away that had hidden the secret so long. She might have to hide it from everyone's knowledge, down in the darkest corner of her heart for all her life long; she determined so to hide it carefully; but the knowledge would always be there. She would never be able to deny again the understanding of her own feelings that had come to her at the entrance of the pine-wood that evening.

CHAPTER IX.

MADAME'S FÊTE.

Yet would the village praise my wondrous power,
And dance, forgetful of the noontide hour.
Alike all ages. Dames of ancient days
Have led their children through the mirthful maze,
And the gay grandsire, skilled in gestic lore,
Has frisked beneath the burden of threescore.

"WHAT a difference it makes in one's intimacy with a person, to have known him in two places! One has so many people and things to talk about when one meets in a fresh place, that it is impossible to keep up reserve or shyness. Did you ever happen to notice this, dear mamma," Emmie wrote to her mother some three weeks after the events of the last chapter, "or have you wondered at all, why there has been so much about Mr. Wynyard Anstice in my letters lately? I like to tell you everything just as it happens, you know; and as Madame de Florimel is always sending for me to go down to the château, or coming up with Mr. Anstice to spend a long day in walking about her property on this hill, I am a great deal with them, and

they naturally come into all my letters. Aunt Rivers seems to feel as I do about being more intimate with people when one meets them in strange places. I used to think she disliked Mr. Anstice and tried to keep him away from her house in London, but here she is very much pleased when he calls to see her, and likes to talk over Frank's and Melville's prospects, and to recall anecdotes of their school-days. Mr. Anstice is very kind in humouring her, but between ourselves I don't think he likes her any better than he used to do. I am afraid he pays her this attention only because he thinks her really very ill and is sorry for her. He asked me yesterday if I thought Uncle Rivers understood how very little good she has gained by coming here. I felt ashamed of myself, for I fear I have not been watching the state of Aunt Rivers's health lately as exactly as I should do. Ward says it is all her own fault that she does not get well, and I am puzzled, because it does seem as if temper had a good deal to do with it. Whenever I hint at asking Uncle Rivers to come and see how we are getting on, my aunt is very angry, and absolutely forbids my writing. She cannot bear the thought of my uncle and Alma leaving London till the end of the season, and she has planned to make a little tour in the mountains with Madame

de Florimel and Mr. Anstice when the heat is too great for us to remain here. I wonder whether this will be really good for her, and whether I ought to oppose the scheme, in spite of its sounding very delightful, as I confess it does, when we all talk about it together?"

Emmie, who had been scribbling as fast as her fingers could move, here laid down her pen, intending to take a furtive look at her aunt, who was also occupied with her home letter, and then to make up her mind as to whether the scruple expressed in the last sentence need be attended to. She looked down, however, more quickly than she had looked up, for to her surprise Lady Rivers had also suspended her pen, and was gazing considerably at her. Lady Rivers was in the middle of a letter to Alma. What could she have found to say to Alma about her? Emmie's conscience was clear of any offence beyond a little pre-occupation of late, but there was something so unusual, so sinister in the look, that her cheeks went on tingling under its influence all the time she was finishing her letter. Her blushes would have burned even more fiercely if she had been clairvoyante, and could have read the sentence Lady Rivers had just indited, and which she carefully covered with a piece of blotting-paper while she leaned back in her chair to rest and cough, and take the sooth-

ing drops she required now after every little exertion. It was a sentence that had cost her a good deal of consideration and planning, and it gave her some anxiety still, as she sat back in her chair thinking it over: "Emmie West and your old friend, Wynyard Anstice, have set up quite a marked flirtation since he turned up so unexpectedly here. I always told you that he was a flirt, and very easily won, but I think this last fancy of his will turn out to be the right thing for him, and that he is in earnest *this time*. Emmie will make a capital poor man's wife, and she has too little knowledge of the world or of society, poor child, to be harmed or annoyed by his eccentricities."

"What effect would these words have on Alma?" Lady Rivers questioned with herself. "Surely they would cure her of any little hesitation, any temptation to regret the past, which must be causing that unsatisfactory behaviour on which even Sir Francis had been remarking lately. Alma's pride would certainly be too deeply stung to allow her to drive her present lover from her when the old one had already consoled himself. The news would be felt as a humiliation; but it would bring her to her senses, and perhaps her discontent with the brilliant lot Providence had assigned to her, deserved the slight punishment of seeing her

little cousin carry off the man she would have chosen if she had been allowed her own insane way. One could not—no, even Alma ought not to expect to have everything just as she would like it in this world. She could not reasonably expect a large fortune, and—everything.” Here Lady Rivers, in spite of the reasonableness on which she prided herself, heaved a fretful sigh; for, strange to say, at that moment the word “everything” represented in her mind Wynyard Anstice, weighed against Horace Kirkman as a husband and son-in-law. Wynyard’s pleasant manners, his gentlemanly good looks, the sympathy with which he had lately listened to her complaints about Melville’s difficulties in Canada and Gerald’s college career, and words dropped by him, which, even to her perceptions, revealed a higher standard of right and wrong, and stricter views of what was due from himself to other people, than quite everybody held. These and other qualifications were summed up in Lady Rivers’s mind by the word “everything;” and while she told herself that they were, to be sure, mere *bagatelles*, that one could not reasonably expect to be thrown in along with that other grave requirement, she yet sighed. They were characteristics that made life very pleasant when one’s near relations had them; one was even perhaps disposed to value them unduly in times

of illness like this, when the conviction would force itself that one must die sooner or later, and that one's children, however well married, could but come to die too in the end, and might, if unpleasant stories were true, be disposed in the other world to reproach the parents who had neglected *that* side of the question in their views for them in this.

These, however, were not reflections to be indulged in, after one had taken one's drops. The Kirkmans went to church nearly as often as other people, if they did not entertain high-flown views about duty and unselfishness. Why should one make comparisons? It was quite time that Alma made up her mind, and the little hint, just penned, if even it ran before the fact somewhat, was wholesome for her, and might put an end to the suspense that was wearing one's life out, and effectually preventing one from getting well.

"Emmie, my dear," Lady Rivers said, rousing herself from her reverie, as the sound of approaching carriage-wheels was heard through the open window, "I don't think I will see Mr. Anstice when he comes in. Neither he nor you ever take afternoon tea, I know, so I think I will go away and take mine in my room, and you can go down to the château to see the *fête* as soon as ever you like."

Emmie did not remonstrate or offer to give up the *fête* at the château, to stay with her aunt, for she had discovered that obedience to all Lady Rivers's whims was not only the best policy, but the truest kindness. This new whim of sending her away for whole afternoons, whenever there was anything pleasant going on at the château, was too agreeable to be quarrelled with. Indeed, except when writing to her mother, Emmie had had no time lately to take account of how the days passed. Each one had brought some fresh pleasure that filled her thoughts too full for backwards or forwards looking, and concentrated all her powers on just living in the outward and inward sunshine that had come to her. Even shyness and self-consciousness had for the time released her from their disabling spells. Wynyard's comings and goings no longer agitated her, for she had reached that dangerous, deceptive state of intimacy, when the atmosphere of the person with whom the mind is occupied is as much felt in absence as in presence. She even congratulated herself that she could look forward to the end of this pleasant intercourse with scarcely any regret. There would always be the golden time to remember, and she believed that it would be as good to her after a year's interval as after an hour's.

The *charette* stopped before the house as Aunt Rivers

closed the sitting-room door behind her, and Emmie turned from her unfinished letter to the long mirror between the windows, just to get a furtive glance at herself before anyone came in, in order to ascertain that she was in good looks for the *fête* at the château that was to celebrate Madame de Florimel's birthday. She had on a white piqué dress, one of Constance's last year's travelling costumes, which Alma had considerably packed up for her in the box of summer clothing sent out for Lady Rivers, since the weather grew hot suddenly. It might have looked a little out of date in London, but no one was likely to find that fault with it at madame's *fête*, and even Ward had condescended to pronounce that it could not have fitted Miss West better if it had been made for her; and that though to be sure Lady Forrest's figure was "cementary itself," there was not a quarter of an inch anywhere between her and Miss Emmie. A broad straw hat, freshly trimmed with the very same rose-coloured ribbons that had once given rise to a talk about the Kirkmans at Eccleston Square, lay on the table. Emmie had placed near it a bunch of half-opened May roses—Mary's roses, the loveliest and most richly-scented flower of the flowery neighbourhood, which all the country girls sought for in sunny spots, to wear on that particular day. Madelon had taken care that Emmie

should have the finest blooms to be found on her own particular bush by the river, and Emmie, after fastening the fullest blown rose at her throat, was disposing of a bunch of pink buds and green leaves among her braids under her hat, when Wynyard entered.

He smiled when he saw what she was doing, but not the least cynically; the notion of vanity or coquetry would not have connected itself in his mind with Emmie West if he had surprised her at the glass a dozen times in a day, and he would as little have thought of paying her a compliment, or making the smallest remark to her about her looks, as he would to a child. Her simple fresh-hearted enjoyment of her sunshiny holiday was, day after day, as he watched it, a delightful surprise, a sort of acted poem, to him which he would not have run the risk of disturbing for the world.

"That's right," he said, when she turned round from the glass and showed her fair face, as softly-coloured and sweet as her roses, and her clear happy eyes looking up from the deep rim of her hat. "That's right, I'm glad you are equipped to set forth at once on our enterprise,—‘the discomfiture of the grocer,’—it is time that you and I were on the scene of action, for the adverse forces are gathering already. I met the redoubtable blue *charette* bringing M. Bouchillon in a Paris coat and hat, and

yellow kid gloves, and with, I am afraid, an immense box of *bon-bons* by his side, just as I left the village, while Antoine, poor boy, has been sheepishly hanging about the Place in his blouse all the morning, making himself quite common. What is to be done?"

"A coat!" cried Emmie; "how ridiculous it will look among the blouses."

"That is your opinion too, is it? I have been longing to change costumes with Joseph Marie all the morning; he has made himself sublime in a new blouse, and a bright red handkerchief hanging down from under his cap. I think I should have proposed the exchange to him, but I was afraid of losing my prestige as madame's cousin, which I mean to turn to account to-day in backing up Antoine against the *épicier*. I have fought *épiciers* a good deal at different times in my life, but it's a new thing to be reckoning on a black coat and kid gloves as one's most effective weapons. In fact, Miss West, it strikes me that you and I are coming out in new characters expressly for madame's *fête*—'glasses of fashion' at which everybody will be looking. We have sat neglected in corners together, have we not? and now we are going to shine forth."

"Do you know," said Emmie, smiling, "I remember that you talked to me about La Roquette, and the

dancing under the chestnuts, that very evening. Shall I tell you the truth now? I was wishing that you would go away all the time. I was afraid Aunt Rivers might not like even you to waste so much time upon me at her dance."

"Even me! She has grown much kinder to me now, you see, for she lets me have the honour of taking care of you to the village. I am to bring Madelon too, am I not? The beauty for whose favour these rivals in hat and blouse are to contend to-night. I have only had a passing glimpse of her as yet, and I am curious. Antoine is very confidential with me, but he confines his praises to her courage in digging, and her good soup and nature. I don't believe he knows whether she is pretty or not. When shall I see her?"

"She is not coming with us; she turned shy at the last, and is walking to the village with her mother; but we shall have plenty of company in the *charette*. La Fermière and all her boys are to sit with me in the back seat."

"We will see about that in a minute. Cannot the boys drive? I will warrant 'Bibi' not to run away with us, or be more than an hour and a half in getting us to the château. You and I meanwhile will lay out our plans for this afternoon's campaign, when the triumph of true love,

backed by such distinguished patronage as we two can give, is to be enacted before the whole village."

"Do you think madame will be vexed at what we are doing?" said Emmie, anxiously, when the *charette*, packed to suit Wynyard's views, was well under way, and the boys kept up such a perpetual "Yip, yip," to Bibi, that there was no danger of names being overheard. "I feel guilty for having told you about Madelon and Antoine. I am afraid Madame de Florimel may be hurt at your taking the opposite side to herself. We have no right to interfere, have we?"

"The right of the young to back up true feeling against worldly prudence all the world over," said Wynyard, quickly. "I don't say anything about you, but I at least have a right to protest against interested marriages, and to hate the tyranny that imposes them. I mean to look out for each chance of putting a spoke in the wheel of such arrangements as comes across me through my life."

His pleasant face darkened as he spoke with a sudden flush of anger and pain, and he paused, vexed with himself. He had thought it was all over—this passionate pain at least. He had been congratulating himself on the wisdom of his flight from London, where passing visions of Alma riding with Horace Kirkman in the

park were apt to undo at a stroke the effect of a week's struggle, and he had assured himself that the last angry regret had died out of his heart at the sight of the illness and suffering on his old enemy Lady Rivers's face. For the last week or so he had even thought sometimes that if he were a poet he would celebrate the time of escape from an unhappy love into newly conquered content and freedom as the most beautiful victory of a life. And now here again in a moment came a poisoned arrow from the old trouble, striking with as deadly a sting as ever; testifying that it was living and unconquered still, and that it was influencing his present thoughts and actions in a way he had not suspected. The angry suffering was gone in a moment, however, as quickly as it came; he caught sight of a grieved expression on Emmie's tender face, and remorse for having even for a moment, even by a look, clouded her perfect pleasure, swept other thoughts from his mind for a time. He brought himself back from the abstract view towards which his anger had carried him, to a more direct answer to her question.

"No," he said, "I don't think Madame de Florimel will be disappointed when her scheme falls to the ground. She is more or less prepared; her allies in the village have gradually deserted her, and I even think she will be

glad of a move that will force her *protégé* to retire of his own accord. I shall represent to her that she has the merit of having raised Madelon's value in the eyes of the villagers by bringing such a distinguished wooer as M. Bouchillon to her feet, and that this skilful manœuvre has brought Antoine's parents to wish for the match they previously had despised, and so secured her favourite an advantageous settlement. She will be easily brought to think that all was her own contriving, and I venture to prophesy that before another week is over, Antoine and Madelon will be walking together through all the neighbouring valleys and villages, as is the custom here, to invite all the world to the wedding. You and I shall have to go with them on that occasion, I expect, in the character of best friends. I only hope they will make haste and have it before we leave for our mountain tour."

"But it is rather hard on M. Bouchillon to have been brought here only to be made to look so foolish as he will to-night, when Madelon refuses to dance with him."

"Not at all; he will in five seconds choose someone else, Jeannette, or Louison, or Baptista. He only wants a healthy village girl for a wife, who goes to mass regularly, and has good principles, and makes good soup. The gold chain he has brought with him, of which the whole

village is talking, was merely intended for the *Someone* who would have him. He will be just as well pleased to see it round Baptista's neck as if Madelon wore it. He loves in the abstract, without troubling himself about particulars. Happy man to be so easily satisfied! It is the only safe way of loving, if one is to love at all, you may depend."

"Oh, no!" said Emmie, shrinking, and Wynyard was angry with himself again. A cynical word spoken to her, sounded so incongruous that it was almost an insult.

To secure that he should not offend again he turned to a different subject.

"Have you ever," he asked, "noticed particularly this bit of the hill-side we are passing now, with the pomegranate hedge, and a clump of cactuses in a hollow below? It has the curious effect upon me of taking me back to my childhood in India. I can't say whether because there was a hedge of cactus in my father's compound, or, as I hope, because one of the pictures my mother used to lift me up to look at, was a sketch of this spot done by herself when she stayed here. I incline to the last supposition, the association with my mother is so strong. The first time I came here when I was a boy of eight, walking up the hill with my uncle and Madame de

Florimel, I remember feeling bewildered like a person in a dream at coming suddenly on such a familiar scene. It seemed to start out of my past life, and bring back all sorts of half-forgotten remembrances, and it awoke such a desperate longing for a sight of my mother's face again, that I remember it was hard work to march straight on without letting anyone see anything."

"But could you not have told them?"

"Boys don't know how to talk of mysteries like that; and besides, I think I knew my uncle well enough even then to understand that I could not commit a more deadly offence than to let him see I very much wanted anything he could not give me, least of all, my father and mother. I hardly know how the sense of guilt I had when a child for regretting them first came to me, but I remember the misery of it."

"Your uncle must have cared very much for you then. I don't think I should mind any sort of behaviour that came from too much caring for one."

"*You*, I dare say not, but unfortunately for my uncle I am not made up of such selfless materials, and as I grew older I resented the notion of being made a holocaust to old resentments, burnt up utterly in the fire of his disappointed egoism. I suppose you never happened to read anything of Jacob Böehme?"

"I! I never even heard of him," said Emmie, a little disappointed, as she often was in conversations with Wynyard, when just in the middle of a personal anecdote or recollection he would start aside, and hunt a thought or an allusion back to some author she had never heard of.

"Of course not; it is not likely that the old mystic should have come in your way, but he has long been a great friend of mine, and a discourse of his on the four temperaments was in my mind when I spoke about my uncle. I was thinking that he belonged to what Böehme calls the order of people whose natures are grounded in elemental fire. A hungry yearning for power, or it may be for love, possesses them, and they feed their desires by drawing others' wills and hearts to theirs and absorbing them so utterly that their victims become mere fuel without any individuality left. These are the ambitious ruling spirits of the world, successful, but seldom or never happy."

"I hope I am not a fire-spirit, then," asked Emmie.

"You!" said Wynyard, looking at her with a smile, "no; I don't think there is the compelling power about you. You would not be so much afraid of Aunt Rivers if you were a fire-spirit. Yours is a much gentler attraction than the fierce rush of the fire. Your cousin

Alma is more akin to the bright element that draws us poor wind-spirits into its neighbourhood to consume and destroy the life in us, and leave us exhausted and worthless. Luckily, however, the air-temperament has its power of escape and revenge. Sometimes we blow out the fire and get free, and then we are very happy in our freedom, and heal ourselves marvellously, finding the whole universe open to air, and in fact boundless. Look back at the range of mountains behind us; are not the colours about the Chèvre d'Or fine? The dark blues on his cavernous left side softening up into the lilac of his head, which melts again into the dazzling whiteness of the snow-peaks behind. To think that all that beauty is due to *air*—bare rocks, as hard and barren as our worst troubles, and air to see them through. I think we may be very thankful to be grounded in the yielding temperament, don't you?"

"Am I an air-spirit too, then?"

"Unless there is something of the earth element in your nature, I am not sure."

"Is it something bad?" asked Emmie anxiously.

"Böehme gives it the highest possibilities of all, and says that the noblest spirits are inclosed in the earth element during their sojourn in time; but it is something

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of a prison to them, they yearn upwards from it to God, and can only receive the good of life through love, divine or human. Without that, they are dark and melancholy, but when love delivers them, they are capable of the utmost self-devotion—giving out from their dark ground the most beautiful gifts, without asking anything for themselves but the fostering warmth of love—as the earth turns sunshine into food and verdure and flowers.”

“Yes, I think I understand,” said Emmie; “but what are the water-people like?”

“They poorly imitate the qualities of the fire-type, but with them all is illusion, for though like the fire-people their nature is to absorb instead of to give out, they, after the manner of water, hold shifting reflections and images only in their hearts—notions, not realities, which they inclose coldly and easily let go. They have, however, the persistence which water has in undermining and subtly finding its way, and they divide will-power pretty evenly perhaps with their fire opposites, though they gain their ends slowly and with much less show and noise. There are lots of water-people in the world, you may depend upon it. Would it be impertinent to put down your Aunt Rivers, and perhaps Lady Forrest, among, let us say, the more estimable of the Naiads? It needs all the four elements, you see (according to

Böehme), to make up human nature, and we must not quarrel with what comes to us."

"For all that, I should not like to be a water-person. What do you make out Madame de Florimel to be?"

"Look at her," cried Wynyard, for by this time they had entered the village and were drawing up in front of the chestnut-shaded Place, where Madame de Florimel always received her birthday guests, there being no level space in the château garden for dancing. "Look at her as she stands there with her little court round her, stately and smiling, moving as lightly and laughing as merrily as that little girl whose cheek she is stooping to pinch just now. Look, and say if anything but air could clothe a defeated life and a lonely old age with such colours, blotting out its regrets and sorrows in sympathetic reflected happiness, as the Chèvre d'Or hides its crags and chasms in purple glory. Hurrah! for the air-people's power of escape from themselves, I say. It is a great gift. But here comes Joseph Marie to take the *charrette*. Does he not look triumphant? Madame's *fête* is the crowning season of the year to him. All the old men of the neighbourhood are already drinking and praising his wine down there at the bottom of the Place, and by-and-by the girls will be invited to eat some watery strawberries which he and madame between them have coaxed

to grow in the château gardens, and of which he is as proud as if he had created them himself. He is not sure that he has not something to do with the fact that the chestnuts are in fuller flower this year than usual. Let me help you to get down; we must clear our heads of mysticism and turn to the business of the evening. Ah, there is M. Bouchillon himself coming up to madame to present his box of *bon-bons* before the whole village! They will be won over in a body by the grace with which he is making his felicitations, unless we hasten to interpose a counter attraction. Madame, who hates presents, is smiling, I am afraid, on that *bon-bon* box. Let us go forward and distract her attention before everyone in the commune has discovered that the giver is her favourite."

The Place was a square level piece of ground that lay just below the château, fronting the principal village street, and overlooked by the church on a rising ground beyond the little river. The tall magnolias at the end of the château garden flanked one side, and just now cast a pleasant shadow, in which madame's fauteuil and two or three rows of seats for special friends had been set out by Joseph Marie. The benches at the upper end of the square among the chestnut-trees were, however, still the most popular places of resort. Old women with their

knitting, women with babies, had established themselves there an hour or two before, and now groups of young men in clean blouses and girls in white caps or shady hats were gathering and waiting for the music to strike up.

This was a long-established village festival, or, even in honour of madame, the thrifty villagers would not have been tempted from work in their fields so early in the afternoon. As the *fête* fell on Madame de Florimel's birthday it had become a custom with her to make herself the patroness of the occasion, so far as providing a cask of her own wine went, paying the musicians, and coming out to sit under the magnolias and chat with everybody who liked to claim her notice. Madame's conduct in this matter of the *fête* was felt by all her neighbours to be manifestly English, for what was the sense of giving away good wine in a promiscuous indiscriminating manner which did not provoke individual gratitude or necessitate return? When the custom was first instituted, indeed, there had not been wanting captious spirits, headed by the landlords of the two *cabarets*, who insisted that such a slighting of sound wine had something anti-national and unpatriotic about it, and was designed to cast a doubt on the supremacy of the French people.

As years went on, however, and madame's peculiarities,

English or otherwise, were found invariably to conduce to the advantage of those who dealt with her, a greater sense of confidence sprang up, and among the young people of the neighbourhood at least, madame's *fête* came to be looked upon as the happiest day of the year. Her presence, her gaiety, her pleasant notice of one and another, gave it an interest that was wanting at other *fêtes*. The strictest of the mothers were apt to relax their surveillance somewhat when "madame" was sitting by to encourage the young people in enjoying themselves, and if, as many people have averred, there were a greater number of love-matches made in La Roquette than in most French villages, it was perhaps owing to the fact that "madame," the greatest match-maker of the neighbourhood, had always a weakness towards aiding a preference that could be traced back to a lingering walk under the chestnut-trees on her own *fête* day.

To sit by Madame la Comtesse on the château chairs was a distinction capriciously meted out by the owner of them to special favourites, on her birthday. She had a habit of gathering the best, and it must be confessed also the prettiest, of the young girls about her by "nods and becks," and gracious little compliments, remembered and repeated among themselves for all the rest of the year. Once seated under the magnolias the girls' chances for

good partners were secured for the evening, as no young man of any pretensions to merit could condescend to take a partner from the throng by the chestnuts when a magnolia bud still remained to be secured.

"Now you know what a great deal of dancing you will have to go through," Wynyard said, when he had explained all this to Emmie, and placed her on a chair between Madame de Florimel and Madelon. "I know you can dance, for did we not once perform the Lancers together in Eccleston Square when almost everybody else had gone in to supper,—and to-day, instead of being ciphers, we have an important part to play in a village drama. We have to prevent Madelon from proclaiming herself the grocer's bride by dancing in the first dance with him, and encourage her to distinguish her old lover so decidedly as to pique M. Bouchillon into making another choice. Our work begins at once, for see, here comes M. Bouchillon, intent upon joining himself on to Madelon and her mother; intercept him if you can, and keep him in conversation while I hunt Antoine out of the sulky shyness he is indulging among the bowl-players down there. He is ruining himself by such conduct. I expressly forbade him to touch a bowl to-day; it stamps him as a jilted suitor before the whole world."

Emmie's power of keeping up a conversation in French was put to a severe test during the next ten minutes. M. Bouchillon's politeness and secret interest in *la belle Anglaise*, of whom everyone was talking, prevented her being made aware of her deficiencies too plainly, and she managed to be still asking questions about the road to Clelles, which she and her aunt would probably be following in about ten days from now, when the music struck up. Then she felt rather than saw—for her back was turned to the magnolias—that Wynyard had reappeared, walking side by side with the young farmer in his blouse, and that both were standing before Madelon and her mother. She eagerly brought out another question, professing great anxiety for an answer, and though M. Bouchillon betrayed some uneasiness, he made her fully comprehend his reply before he turned round. Then it was too late. Madame Claire had yielded to her daughter's pleading eyes, or to something that this amiable relation of madame's had contrived to insinuate in Antoine's favour; and, there, in sight of all the village, on this important day, was Antoine leading Madelon before madame's nose to the first place in the dance, precisely as it had been last year, and as if no scheme for Madelon's advancement to city life had been on the *tapis*.

Baptista's colour heightened, and Louison felt under her cap to assure herself that her new earrings were properly in sight. Something must have taken a wrong turn in the marriage negotiations at the orange-tree house, and M. Bouchillon and his blue *charette* were still in the market.

"Now," cried Wynyard, turning to Emmie, "it is for us to follow their lead and dance *vis-à-vis* to that shame-faced pair, to give them courage. It must be seen that Madelon's choice is sanctioned by madame's English friends, or our object is only half-done. Won't you come?"

That was an idyllic dance to Emmie, often thought of in after days, but never equalled. The sunshine, the simple music, the laughter of the village children playing under the chestnuts, the broadly-smiling faces all round, a subtle sense of the pleasure with which so many admiring eyes followed her own and her partner's movements; but beyond all, the aura of friendship and sympathetic sharing in a mystery of love which the four dancers interchanged by look and smile and finger-touch, as often as they passed and repassed each other in the complicated figure of the dance, made it something never to be forgotten or repeated in after-life. Wynyard experienced something of the same

feeling, and to him it came consciously and translated itself into thought. His gaiety, which had been somewhat forced since his allusion to Alma on the drive, grew natural and hearty again, and his triumph over M. Bouchillon was untinged by personal bitter recollections. The sweet summer sunshine, the simple happiness that pervaded the very air, were bringing more than healing, they were bringing new life, opening springs of emotion and joy that he had believed sealed for ever. "If one could but live always in Arcadia, if one could but escape from the rush of ambition, from the overwhelming stress and responsibility of more complex forms of life, and go back to nature among friendly people like these, with a tender face like Emmie West's at one's side, a gentle sympathetic heart and mind in one's keeping, responsive as a pure mirror to every thought, breathing out soothing instead of unrest. If one could forget the past and live so——." And then the music stopped, the dance was over, and Wynyard found himself strolling slowly back towards the magnolias at Emmie's side.

"You don't want to sit down again just yet, do you?" he said. "If you will come to the other side of the Place we shall get a new view of the mountains, and I can point out the road we shall all be mounting

next week, when Madame de Florimel takes us to her eyrie in the mountains near Clelles. I heard you cross-questioning M. Bouchillon just now. You can trace miles of the road from the high ground beyond the chestnuts."

The lower end of the Place was almost deserted when they reached it, for a game at bowls had just ended, and the players were gathering round a shed where Joseph Marie presided over the distribution of madame's wine. The ground rose steeply here to a high bank, and when she had mounted it, Emmie commanded a view of the whole range of mountains that sheltered La Roquette from the north wind.

"There," said Wynyard, "do you see something hanging on to the top of that peak up in the sky, a long way off? If you have good eyes you can make out lines and spires that are too regular to be natural projections of the rock. That is St. Valière, our first night's resting-place on our journey; now look lower down the mountain-side, and you will see shadowy lines rising one above the other—that is the winding road, and a splendid road it is, we shall follow to get there."

"Shall we be able to see this valley and the village when we are up there?"

"We shall have a magnificent view of the whole country spread out like a map below us, but whether this particular valley and village will be distinguishable from others I can't say."

"I shall make it out, I think," said Emmie, "for we shall have left it for ever then, you know."

"Let us climb the hill to the church, and I will show you something else."

The *Angelus* sounded while they were crossing the Place, and when they came out on the road they met a few old women and girls who had slipped away from the crowd under the trees, to kneel for a few moments in the church. Candles were lighted and altars decked for the *fête*, and Wynyard and Emmie went to the open door to peep in; just then Antoine and Madelon passed them, and entering went to an altar and knelt down side by side. Involuntarily Emmie glanced back at Wynyard, and they exchanged a congratulatory smile.

"Madame Claire must have given them leave," said Emmie in a whisper, "or Madelon would not have come."

"Fortunate people!" answered Wynyard. "*They* are in earnest enough one sees, and have early come to the end of their story. Well, we have done a good day's work, have we not? If we come back here

twenty years hence, how those two will talk to us about to-day."

The plural pronouns slipped out quite involuntarily, but directly they were spoken, Wynyard was aware of the significant sound the sentence had, and saw too that the surprise which had first come into Emmie's eyes had changed into something else before she lowered them. Was it reproof, or rather was it not overpowering consciousness? The soft line of her cheek and the curve of her white neck, which was all he could see as she turned from him, were dyed crimson. He had had no business to say it, and he would not offend her for the world, but he could not at the moment feel as sorry for his thoughtlessness as he ought. He felt as if he had got out of his ordinary self this evening into a new world, with new possibilities that had often been near him, but never recognised till just now. His voice had a tone that Emmie had never heard in it before when he spoke to her again, though the words had nothing in them, and were merely spoken to break the silence that was growing too long.

"Madame is lucky in the season on which her birthday falls, since so many anniversaries of it were fated to be celebrated here. She would have been puzzled how to manage an out-door *fête* in England

now, but here it is the crowning time of the year. It would be impossible to crowd more beauty into a day than this one has given us. I could fancy it a meeting-day between spring and summer, when for a few hours they have brought their perfections together to make a day of Paradise. Yesterday there was hardly such a rich flush of green over the vineyards and hill-sides, and to-morrow its first freshness will have faded a little."

"Oh no!" cried Emmie quickly. It will get more beautiful every day *here*. I am only sorry that you showed me the road to London to-day, for I can't help looking at it, and remembering that when we are on it, we shall have left all this behind us."

"Let us call it the road to St. Valier till we get there," said Wynyard. "I don't mean to cheat myself out of a day of my holiday by thinking about what is to come at the end. I am drawing largely on the future by taking such a long one this year, and it ought to have stores of strength and rest in it to go upon till—I can't say when. Don't you think that when you and I meet in Saville Street—say on some such foggy day as that one when my cousin and I brought Miss Moore home with a broken head—we shall get a great deal of sunshine out of imagining ourselves back again at the church door of La Roquette while the *Angelus* was ringing, and Madelon

and Antoine were strolling up the hill between the quince-trees, with the afternoon light on their faces? Don't you think we can manage to make a sufficiently strong spell from that to keep the fog out of our thoughts at least?"

"Yes, I do," said Emmie softly.

And Wynyard's conscience pricked him again, but more feebly this time, for he thought he meant, and more than meant, all that his words implied. And why should he not do his best to go back cured, and better than cured, safe for ever from the regrets and angers that he had found so miserably disabling and useless? Why force himself to believe that there were no real jewels in the world because the one he had coveted first had proved a mere bit of tinsel?

"The women are coming out of church," he said a moment later. "Their *fête* day *chapelet* has been duly said, and they are ready for their dancing and their gossip again. We had better go back to the magnolias, or madame will think we are setting the villagers a bad example. You must dance with Antoine next time to complete his glorification, and I will ask Madelon to be your *vis-à-vis*, and then we shall have given the villagers enough to talk about."

Emmie was relieved, and perhaps a little surprised, to

be received quite cordially by madame, and welcomed back to the coveted seat at her right hand. There were no cold looks to mar her pleasure that day, though Wynyard danced again with her twice. Everybody smiled upon her; even M. Bouchillon requested the honour of her hand from madame, and performed the last quadrille with her in a style which was considered by Baptista and her mother to eclipse by a long way Wynyard's characterless dancing.

By the time this last dance was over, and cups of English tea dispensed under the magnolias, and swallowed with heroic determination by madame's favourites, La Fermière and her boys had packed themselves into the *charette*, and were waiting impatiently for Emmie to join them. Even on *fête* days at La Roquette the heads of families insisted on early hours, for to-morrow's work must not be trenched upon.

Madame had a little word for Emmie when she came up to say good-night, that made her cheeks once more that day out-colour her May roses.

"So, so, thou hast a will of thine own, little one. One guesses how it is that thy heart is set on advocating the English way; but I will wait to write to thy mother till I can send her a little message that I have made in my head already. I do not think *now* that she has

neglected to think of thy future, however English her way of acting may be ;” and then madame stooped down and kissed Emmie on both cheeks, looking into her eyes between times with a meaning smile that quite took away Emmie’s breath, and put an end to all chance of her getting said the birthday congratulations she had reserved to this last minute.

Joseph Marie was to drive the *charette* up the hill, and the boys, a little excited and noisy, had secured the places near the driver for themselves, leaving room for Emmie near the door. Wynyard came out into the road to help her in, and to wrap a shawl of madame’s round her, for the air had turned chilly after the sunset.

“ Well,” he said, as they were starting, “ it has been a splendid day, and it is over, but we are not going to regret it, are we ? It’s the *first* day of summer, not the *last* day of spring, remember, and things are to go on getting better and better, you settled that.”

Two hours later, when the Place was quite deserted, and the twinkling lights in the village street and in the houses on the distant hills were disappearing one after the other, till the whole scene was left to a garment of moonlight, Wynyard came through the side garden door again, and paced up and down under the magnolias. He had been having rather a sharp argument with

Madame de Florimel—one of those word battles which generally began and ended in playful teasing, but which were apt to have a belt of earnestness between, when a word or two was sometimes said that left a sting, or at least matter for thought and self-questioning behind it. To-night a good deal of the talk had been in earnest, and Wynyard had said and heard much that he wanted to look at over again, under the calming influence of the moonlight. He had grown a little hot perhaps in defending his meddling in Antoine's affairs, and he had said some bitter things which he was obliged to acknowledge to himself were still so persistently in his mind that they would rush out whenever they were challenged. Yet *that*, after all, was not the point which occupied him most. Some quiet words of Madame de Florimel's, at the end of all the heat, while they were making friends, caused the disturbance that had sent him into the fresh air to cool his head. Words that took for granted the mutual attraction between himself and Emmie, and represented it as a fact too transparent for any looker-on during the last three weeks to be in any doubt about it, unless—and in this lay the sting—unless there were indeed some deeper likeness between himself and his mother than that eagerness of speech and vivacity of manner which Madame

de Florimel was fond of commenting on. Wynyard's idea of himself was that he was even too persistent in all his likings and prejudices. Was it so, or was his consistency in this one matter, which, eminently to one of his affectionate nature was the making or marring of a life, slipping away from him? If so, was it a matter for self-disgust or for intense rejoicing? Should he open his arms to let in the possible new love, or sternly order it away to cling to what — a bitter recollection of the woman who had chosen Horace Kirkman instead of himself, after playing with his love for years.

Wynyard had left the château garden and come out into the Place, because he could not think out this question in a place that had an association which Madame de Florimel's words had made a little disturbing to-night — the picture, namely, which she had often drawn for him of his mother and his uncle on the day when they had come up the marble steps from the lower garden hand-in-hand to tell her of the engagement that was never to be fulfilled. The suggestion that there might be an inherited taint of fickleness, or at least of the hasty impulsive yielding that had made his mother a traitor, was not welcome just now, when the matter in hand seemed to be a conquest over a too persistent

longing for what was beyond his reach. What virtue could there be in holding on to an angry pain felt to be a clog and hindrance to the best part of his life, if by right and healthful means it could be effectually exorcised? If, as Madame de Florimel hinted, he had inadvertently won that fresh, sweet, simple heart——. Wynyard checked his rapid pace as this thought presented itself, and his eye fell suddenly on a May rosebud that lay in his path, where his next step would have crushed it into the dust.

He stooped, picked it up, and laid it on his hand. It must have fallen from Emmie West's hat when she stood just here wishing Madame de Florimel good-night an hour or two ago. Wynyard remembered that he had noticed the flower touching her fair flushed cheek and her delicate ear when she turned from him after the look they had exchanged by the church door. Then he smiled rather bitterly at himself as the remembrance came back to his mind of a time long ago when he had picked up a faded flower from the ground—a camellia, dropped from Alma's dress on to the dusty floor of a London ball-room, which he had secured as a priceless treasure and kept for weeks. One could not without some self-contempt be as foolish as that

for more than one woman, he thought, and he made a hasty movement to toss the rosebud into the path again. No, he could not, it was too like Emmie West for that—too beautiful, and fresh, and pure to lie in the dust. He compromised the matter by slipping it somewhat carelessly into his button-hole, and when he resumed his walk, and his thoughts calmed down and gradually assumed the shape of plans, he was aware every now and then of the subtle arrowy perfume of the flower breathed up into his face, and claiming a recognition in an under-current of consciousness that kept crossing his soberer reflections with tender fancies and golden gleams of hope. He would not be hasty, there was no need for haste; and yet there was equally no need for withdrawal in any degree from the intimacy which he felt had somewhat changed its character to-night. He resolved that the holiday up to the end of that journey to Clelles of which they had spoken should be a complete holiday, one of those rare times for living in, and enjoying the present, without backward or forward glances such as come into busy earnest lives, like oases of greenness and refreshment, good to look back upon. Decisive questions might be left to settle themselves leisurely in Saville Street when work-

days had begun again. The May Rose—his May Rose—Wynyard said to himself, with a quiet content stealing into his heart, was not, as he well knew, a fine-weather flower only, but might be trusted to breathe its delicate fragrance in dark as well as in sunny days.

CHAPTER X.

A LORD OF BURLEIGH.

Junge Herzen reich an Liebes wonne
Ueber allen hoch die Frühlingssonne
Tretet ein geofnet sind die Pforten
Und ein Paradies ist aller Orten.

Cease, dreams, the images of day-desires,
To model forth the passions of the morrow ;
Never let rising sun approve you liars
To adduce more grief to aggravate my sorrow.
Still let me sleep, embracing clouds in vain,
And never wake to feel the day's disdain.

THE windows of "Air Throne" stood wide open, and an incessant melody of rumbling wheels in the street far below, and shrill twittering of sparrows in the eaves, came through, with now and then a hot puff of smoke from a neighbouring chimney, bringing a cloud of smuts to settle unheeded on the bare tables and the empty easel. The place had a strangely forlorn unused look, in spite of the spring sunshine that poured in at the casements and made dusty squares of light on the floor. There was, however, no one to notice its unnatural appearance but

Mildred West, who having suddenly recollected that more than three weeks ago she had promised Christabel Moore to attend to the airing of her rooms in her absence, had rushed up and thrown the windows wide. Then having spied out a book of Katherine's, left on a distant dusty shelf, she carried it to the hearth-rug, and was now seated before the empty grate, with her elbows propped on the Skeleton's box, greedily devouring the contents of her prize. Of late Mildie's opportunities of securing a free half-hour for the absorbed reading which was a prime necessity of existence with her, had been too rare to admit of her being at all fastidious as to the circumstances under which the treat was taken. She could read standing upright on the stairs, while the Gentle Lamb was squirting water down on to her head from an upper story, by way of experimenting on the old practice of torture by water; or in the twilight of the shoe-hole, where Mary Ann occasionally imprisoned her in bitter exasperation at the disastrous result of her efforts to supply Emmie's place by volunteer work downstairs.

The safety and solitude of "Air Throne," let it be ever so unlike itself, might be supposed to supply all that was needed for absolute enjoyment, but, as we said before, Mildie was not altogether the dry student she supposed herself. There were avenues to her soul that were

reached by other than her favourite ways of taking in knowledge; and now, while she believed herself to be wholly occupied in an attempt to understand the mechanism of the ear, the outside aspect of the place was stealing into her mind without her having given it leave to be noticed, and was gradually drawing her thoughts into a new channel. After a while the pensive spell grew too strong to be resisted; she left a page unturned, dropped her head into her clasped hands, and allowed the underlying thoughts to come to the front.

What a long time it was, to be sure, since that evening when she had brought Mr. Anstice up here, and Casabianca had made him sit on the Skeleton's box. How different "Air Throne" had looked then. How still more striking were the changes that had come over the people then assembled round the fire. It was winter then, to be sure, and now it was spring, but the passing of one season into another did not use to bring anything to remark upon. Spring generally stayed outside Saville Street, or only entered in the form of glaring sunshine and hot dust. Emmie, as her letters showed, had got into a new sort of spring this year, and Katherine had filled two sheets with a description of a mountain ramble, instead of with the abstract of a lecture she had promised; and Christabel—that was the strangest of all—

Saville Street had not kept the spring out of her face on the day when she had told Mildie about the sketching tour she had planned with a friend, and asked her to take care of her rooms and of her letters in her absence. How fresh and bright she had looked on the morning when she left the house early, in a new white piqué dress that surely ought to have been kept for Sunday wear, and with a white felt hat on her head, that would have seemed babyish on anyone else, but which made her look—like an angel, Mildie thought, or, yes—a bride. Then a vision of Christabel as she looked that morning came back, and Mildred's thoughts hovered over it, taking it all in as she had hardly done at the time.

A pure white dazzling vision, strangely unlike the Christabel who used to flit up and downstairs behind Katherine, like her shadow, pale and dim. There had been plenty of colour and light in the face that Mildie now recalled, and tried to read as she had not thought to read it at the time. What a soft dewy light there was in the large eyes, whose beauty, Mildie believed, no one had ever noticed but herself (people were so stupid); and what a trembling smile on the red lips, with something wistful and troubled on the face too, now she came to think about it, which caused her some surprise. For she does not care so much about me, Mildred thought, as

to be troubled at bidding me good-bye, and she said she was coming back in a fortnight. Why did she seem almost sorry to go away for such a short absence, and why, just at the last, when the cab that was to take her to the station was at the door, did she run back into the inner room and kneel for a moment by Katherine's bed, as if she had forgotten to say her prayers that morning? People were certainly very strange this year, and their ways were harder to comprehend than the mysteries of acoustics, which Katherine's book promised to make quite plain-sailing in time, if one could but give one's mind to it.

Then Mildie wondered if she ought to have told anyone about Christabel's strange behaviour that morning. Yet, who was there to tell? Mrs. Urquhart was away in Devonshire, and the doctor hardly ever at home, to say nothing of the utter impossibility of stopping him in his rapid flights up and downstairs to tell him such a story. Mamma, herself, no — not if everybody in the world were going away to be married secretly, could Mildie have given her mother a fresh cause for anxiety just then. She could not knowingly add a straw's weight to the load of care under which her mother was sinking—yes, sinking. How grave Dr. Urquhart had looked after his interview the other day, and how

seriously he had talked of the necessity of persuading Emmie to come home earlier than her late letters promised. Poor, unsuspecting, blind Emmie! If she understood how things were going on at home now; would she write long letters about village dances and flowers, as if one could be quite happy, and forget one's whole family, and all the troubles in the world, just because the sun was shining?

Mildie, feeling as if she stood upon a height of sad experiences, looked with a little contempt upon the childishness into which Emmie and Christabel appeared to have descended lately. If falling in love (and Mildie had not been as unobserving as her mother of the frequent recurrence of Wynyard's name in the La Roquette letters) meant such stupid preoccupation, such selfish folly—nay, such deceit, as the conduct of her two former models appeared to witness to, just now—if falling in love necessarily dragged one down into such depths as these, Mildie registered a vow that she would faithfully keep clear of any such calamity in her own life. She would never fall in love—no, not if a mathematician, who had discovered a new planet, like Adams, or a philosopher as great as Humboldt should come to ask her. Neither Emmie nor Christabel had had temptations of this nature. Wynyard Anstice might be

clever, but he always slipped away from the discussion of any topic of real moment. And as for the cousin, Mildie remembered that when he had called on Christabel, about a week after Katherine left, and she had chanced to look in during his visit, she had found him before Christabel's easel, pretending to have a drawing-lesson, but not working earnestly, for he and Christabel were laughing over his failures like two silly children. Contemptible, indeed, to fall in love with a man who could not even draw as well as herself.

Was that one of the boys coming to summon her to tea already, and had she wasted a whole hour of the afternoon? No, there was no one in the house now who ran upstairs with such a light springy step, unless—Mildred sprang up without waiting to complete her conjecture, and found it already answered, for the door opened, as she turned round, and Christabel stood in the entrance. Christabel, certainly, though to Mildie's startled eyes it was not quite the same Christabel she had been used to see enter that room, nor yet the radiant vision in the white piqué dress to whom she had bidden good-bye three weeks ago. Had she grown an inch or two taller, or what was there in her present appearance which arrested on Mildie's lip the remonstrance for coming back without due notice, which occurred at the

first moment of surprise? This new Christabel who walked straight to the table and seized at once on a heap of Katherine's letters lying there, did not look a person to be scolded so easily as that other one had used to be.

"So you are come?" was all Mildie ventured, when, after tearing open and devouring the contents of the latest letter, Christabel turned to shake hands with her.

"So you are come back? Has Mary Ann seen you yet?"

"Not yet," said Christabel, laughing. "The Gentle Lamb opened the door for me, and helped my box into the hall, but I hope Mary Ann will forgive me for coming back, as I have brought her a present, and one for you, too, Mildie; so please to leave off staring at me with such wide-open eyes. What is the matter with me? Have I changed into someone else since I went away?"

Christabel smiled as she spoke, and yet a sudden rush of colour came up and dyed her cheeks under Mildie's scrutinising gaze—nay, her very smile had a sort of defiant consciousness in it that a stupider person than Mildie might have noticed.

"I don't know," answered Mildie, bluntly. "Where have you been?"

"To several places," said Christabel; "farther away, perhaps, than I thought to travel when I stood here last; but that won't make my presents less welcome, I hope."

"I don't know," repeated Mildie. "Does Katherine know where you have been?"

"Katherine has been travelling herself, and I see that my letters have missed her, but she has not been uneasy, I knew I should find a great budget here."

"Why don't you take off your hat and your gloves?" said Mildie, a little falteringly, when Christabel had taken up another letter and begun to read it.

Christabel did not speak at once, but she put down her letter and looked at Mildie, and for a second the dreamy blue and the honest grey eyes encountered each other. Mildie, whose consciousness of honest intention was at first stronger than her suspicion that she had been impertinent, tried hard to hold out, but at last her obstinate lids fell, and her cheeks crimsoned.

"My dear child," said Christabel, slowly, "when your mother asks me any questions I shall be ready to answer them, and in the meantime I think you had better go downstairs and ask Mary Ann to send me some tea, for I have had a long journey to-day."

Mildie escaped from the room without another look; but the instant the door closed behind her, Christabel gathered all Katherine's letters into a heap in her lap, sank down into the nearest chair, and covered her face with her gloved hands.

"There," she said to herself. "I have fought my first little battle, taken my first step in concealment, and it was horrid—horrid. Will every day, every hour, bring something like it? Will the burden be always as heavy as it is now, when I have only carried it one day? I did not know how hard it would be when I promised; how even the reading of Katherine's letters would be poisoned, because they were not written to *me*, but to that other self whom I left behind me nearly a month ago. But I must not lose heart just because he is not here at my side to make it seem right. He has gone to do what is as hard to him as concealment from Katherine is to me, and till that is accomplished I will bear my part. I must do now what I could not make up my mind to do while he was with me. I must make my left hand tell a lie, and look like Christabel Moore's hand again, which it is not."

Then, hearing sounds of someone mounting the stairs, Christabel drew off her gloves, and with them two rings, from the third finger of her left hand, which she slipped on to a little chain of Katherine's hair she always wore round her neck. When, a minute after, Mildie entered, carrying a tea-tray, she found her standing before the empty grate, with her hands resting on the chimney-piece, looking fixedly at them, with quite the old dreamy

expression on her small pale face. It relieved Mildie immensely, for she felt that she had again got someone in the house whom she could influence, and order about and bully a little when she thought it needful.

"You did not suppose that Mary Ann would bring up your tea herself, did you?" she began. "You will find you won't get anything just now, unless you go down for it yourself, or come to me to help you. It's lucky the weather's so warm, for we have given up having a boy to help, and Mrs. Urquhart's servant has gone with her into the country, and there's no one to do anything but Mary Ann. As to carrying trays to the attics, of course she won't."

"Never mind," said Christabel, rousing herself, "I have not grown into a useless log during my holiday; I shall soon fall into my old ways, and give very little trouble."

"Except in answering the door to—to your visitors," observed Mildie meaningly. "Christabel, I want to tell you something."

"Well."

"The old watchmaker has called four or five times while you were away to ask for you, and papa heard him talking to the Gentle Lamb in the hall one evening, and he was dreadfully annoyed. He told mamma afterwards

that he would not allow lodgers in the house if they were to have callers and his children had to open the door to them."

"I will explain it to David myself. The Gentle Lamb shall not have to open the door to him again," said Christabel.

"Or—or to—other people," stammered Mildie.

"Or to the only other person who ever does come to see me, I promise you," said Christabel with dignity. "No, I am not angry, but you had better leave me now, for I have all these letters of Katherine's to read and answer before bed-time."

Though Christabel glanced eagerly through her letters as soon as she was left alone, it was but a hurried search through the pages, to gather the bare facts, leaving the intermediate sentences of loving anxiety and conjecture as to her own doings unread; neither did she take up the letters again and prepare to answer them when her slight meal was finished. She took a low seat by the window, and sat for more than an hour, watching the slow fading of the daylight from that little square of sky between the heads of two chimney-stacks, which had been hers and Katherine's summer prospect for so many evenings of the two past years. When the darkness drove her at last to leave the window

and light her lamp, and she had replenished the dried-up ink in her inkstand, she took a note-book from her travelling-bag instead of a sheet of paper, and began to write in it.

“Yes, dear Katherine,” she scribbled rapidly, “I will write my real daily letter to you here, before I begin that other one that has to go by the post, which will not be real, and which I shall write with double pain to-day, in this room so full of your true face, and with no other face opposite me to explain my conduct to myself. Will what I have written here day by day explain it to you, when I put this book into your hand, and ask you to read it from beginning to end, or shall I see in your dear eyes, as you look up, that contempt for me—for us—I have noticed there sometimes when you have spoken or heard of people who, in order to clutch at some great joy, had acted unworthily? Will any explanation make you understand my love for a man, who, having a right to his own will in this matter of marrying me, was not strong enough to take it openly, at the risk of opposition and entreaties from one he dreads to pain? My *so* loving him, that I consented to put the pain on you, Kitty, and on myself, to spare that other? We are the strongest, darling—and have you not told me often that our part is to bear, and bear for pity and humanity you say, and now I say for

love? Why should we love the strong and not the weak, when they hold out their hands to us, and say: 'You only can help me to be the best there is in me to be, only you?' But what is the use of all these words which rush into my mind with the tears to my eyes that are hindering my writing? You will see their sophistry as I do, even while I write them. You will say that I have not been helping him up, but dragging him down, by consenting to the weakness of his first step, and that it is a bad omen for the future. You would not have done it, darling, I know, but—well—we throw ourselves at your feet, and ask you not to despise us. I will give up trying to explain to you why I love him. I will not make any more pretences even to myself. I don't think him a great genius, as I fancied at first, but he is my lover, my husband, he has picked me out of all the world—*me*—to love—and I love him, and there is nothing more to be said. Oh yes, I shall find a thousand things to say in his praise, when you let me talk to you about him, on that first happy day, when you know the whole truth, and your anger at the concealment is over, and you are letting me show you how it was with me after you left me alone! How the fancy world in which I had lived so long crumbled away from me bit by bit, to let this one reality, my love for him, stand clear, and I felt like a

person rising up from a long dream, to stand bare, but glad in the daylight. I am perhaps paying the penalty of having dreamed so long, by being now so shut up in the supreme feeling that has awakened me, yet can I fear, or be cold while my sun shines upon me ?

“ When you have read as far as this page you will have followed us through the whole wonderful month of our wedding journey, and I hope you will forgive me, when I confess that in spite of twinges of conscience, I have shared the delight he has taken in throwing an air of adventure and romance over every step of the way. What a great deal seems to be crowded into that short time now I look back upon it. How the horizon of life has widened round me as the days passed on, and how brightly he has led me forward, taking a sort of child-like delight in surprising me with glimpses of worldly prosperity and ease, such as, you know, and he knows, I never dreamed of stepping into, through my marriage with him ; hinting sometimes at a further surprise that will dazzle me in the future. As if anything could dazzle me when the wonder of such love as he gives me is filling my eyes so full of light that I can see nothing else !

“ What dear jokes we had, about Fortunatus’s purse, during the first few days we were together, when I tried hard to economise the magic coins, so as to have to

return the little old charmed purse to its owner as seldom as possible. What endless amusement he seemed to find in admiring my economical feats, till that day came, after we had been married about a week, when I told him seriously that I thought we ought to take our sketching-boards and begin to work, and he, looking penitent and almost sorrowful, broke it to me that he was not an artist at all. Nothing half so good, he said, but would I forgive him, and take him for what he was, an idle fellow, whose life had been worthless till he fell in love with me? That evening, when we were out walking, he stopped me by a gate in a shady lane, and pointing over fields and woods, to a gleaming white house on a distant hill, he asked me, 'Should I feel at all like the Lady of Burleigh, if one day he should take me to a great old place like that, and tell me it was mine and his?'

"I am afraid he was disappointed, do you know, Katherine—that I stood silent, showing no curiosity, and asking no questions, for a great fear and awe fell over me, and I could only clasp his arm tightly and hold my breath. I don't think it was quite the Lady Burleigh feeling of regret that the life I had looked forward to—the life of working with him, and helping him—was all a dream: I think that expectation had been falling away from me ever since our wedding morning. It was rather

a sudden dread lest I had done a greater wrong than I knew, and taken some great lot stealthily that was not meant for me, and that I should never be happy or feel right in. It was a momentary feeling, but it checked his impulse to confidence, and the next morning I could see he was glad to get back to our Fortunatus's purse-play again. He was pleased to find me unwilling to break the charm of blind dependence on him, and of looking into a golden future, of which he only holds the key. He reminded me that I had once said I would rather have Fortunatus's purse than a great estate, and said, half-seriously, half-playfully, that I might take my choice when I liked, but that, for his part, he should vote for Fortunatus's purse, at all events, for a year or two, while we were young. And then, after another fortnight of such thoughtless happiness, as I suppose we shall never have again, we found ourselves back at the hotel in Derby, where we had stopped after our first day's journey, and where we had directed letters to be sent to meet us. I had nothing, but he found a telegram, to summon him to go at once to his mother, who had been taken ill, in some far-away place in the north of Scotland, where it seems she has a house. The telegram was several days old when it reached us, and we settled, with how much pain I shall not try to tell you, Kitty, that he must start

for the North to-night, leaving me to return to this house alone. It was a hasty, miserable parting, for he was full of remorse about his mother, with whom he had had some little quarrel before she set out for Scotland, and to whom he had not written since 'our day.' I can understand *that*, Kitty, for I know how hard I find it to write to you. As for me, well I have got over the parting, and perhaps the first letter will bring me the best of news, for he promised, just at parting, that as soon as his mother was well enough to bear the news—yes, he said *that*, Kitty, at the last minute, and what a stab the sentence was to my pride—as soon as she was able to bear the news, he would tell her about me, and set me free from my promise of secrecy. Good-night, Kitty, I am going to read your letters through carefully now, and answer your questions as far as I can. If you wonder at the vague information I give you, and grow anxious, and rush over here to find out for yourself what has changed me, it will not be my fault. He will not expect me to conceal anything from you, when you are sitting close to me and looking in my face. Before you can come I shall have heard from him, and he will have told me what to do. I will not let even my wishes be disobedient to my husband till then, for I know he will take the one cloud out of my sky as soon as he can. Ah ! but there will always be its

shadow left, for in my heart and conscience I know that it can never, after this concealment, be quite the same between you and me, Kitty, as it was before. There can never be the same clear open page of life between us, where no secret had ever been written ; we shall never sit hand in hand together in this room as we used to do, feeling our hearts one. But I must not begin to think of this on my first solitary evening here, or it will be all over with me. I will turn to my letters. Good-night again. I shall make you kiss me when you have read this sentence, whether you quite love me as you used to do or not."

But Christabel was not destined to read Katherine's letters through that night ; she had hardly reached the end of the first page, when an interruption came that gave her other things to think of than even Katherine's letters.

CHAPTER XI.

"NOTHING CAN TOUCH HIM FARTHER."

Does the road wind uphill all the way?
Yes, to the very end.
Will the day's journey take the whole long day?
From morn to night, my friend.

But is there for the night a resting-place?
A roof for when the slow dark hours begin.
May not the darkness hide it from my face?
You cannot miss that inn.

Shall I meet other wayfarers at night?
Those who have gone before.
Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?
They will not keep you standing at that door.

Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?
Of labour you shall find the sum.
Will there be beds for me and all who seek?
Yea, beds for all who come.

MILDIE found, as might have been expected, that a large slice of the afternoon had been consumed in her visit to "Air Throne," and that an accumulation of neglected duties awaited her downstairs. Sidney and the Gentle Lamb had broken the handle off the drawing-room door

while constructing an ingenious system of telegraph wires on the staircase, and when Mildie had, by great exertion, secured an entrance to his own room for Dr. Urquhart, she discovered that her mother's cup of cocoa, which she ought to have had at five o'clock, was still standing on a slab in the hall. Remembering the importance Dr. Urquhart attached to her mother's taking some refreshment in the afternoon, she seized the cold mess and rushed into the dining-room, determined to force her mother to swallow a mouthful or two, whether she were inclined for it, in its present state or not. She felt very remorseful when she saw that Mrs. West had already taken her weary stand at the window and was looking down the street with that sad look of frightened expectation in her eyes that had been deepening there ever since Emmie went away.

"Dear mamma," Mildie said a little crossly, because she felt more pitiful than she could well bear, "I do wish you would ring for your cocoa when you want it. Dr. Urquhart said you were to have it regularly, and there might be some chance of your getting it before it is quite cold, if you would only remember it yourself. Mary Ann and I can't be everywhere at once, and think of everything."

Mrs. West submitted meekly to be scolded by her

youngest daughter, as she did to everything else that came in her way.

"My dear," she said, returning the cup, after swallowing a third of its contents with great effort, but with no complaint, "my dear, you know that in the best of times Mary Ann never liked the dining-room bell to be rung in the afternoons, and since I can do so little for anyone, I don't wish to be a burden. I was reading over Emmie's letters to pass the time, and hoping that it was not much after five o'clock, and that I need not begin to wonder yet, why your father and Harry did not come home."

"I'm sure," said Mildie, vindictively, "they come quite soon enough for any good or use their society is to us. No, I don't mean to complain of Harry, though he has chosen to be glum ever since Christabel Moore left the house; I was thinking of you, mother dear. I am sure you hear grumbling enough of an evening after papa comes in; I can't understand why you want to begin sooner."

"Oh, Mildie dear, your father!"

"Yes, I know he is my father, but that does not make it any better for you," persisted Mildie. "I do think, when he has been out all day, he might have the sense not to talk you to death about miserable things when he comes back at night. Why should he scold

you if things are going wrong at the office? How can you help it?"

Mrs. West smiled at the word "scold."

"I almost wish it was me instead of himself he scolded," she said sadly; "if you knew, dear, how he is always blaming himself because he has not been able to do well for us, you would be more sorry for him. It is his love for us that makes him miserable, and that has perhaps pushed him on to some of the mistakes he repents so bitterly now, dear. We cannot be too patient with him."

"*You are patient,*" cried Mildie, with a great impatient sob; and then she stood silent, while rebellious thoughts, such as come to young eager minds when the sad side of life is too persistently thrust upon them by their elders, swelled within her. Patient, indeed! Why should the whole world be clothed in sackcloth for them, just because their father had failed to keep the place in the world he had been born to? Could he not make one moan for it and have done, and let them all sink contentedly to some new sphere and wash their hands, once for all, of all old pretensions and traditions that Mildie for her part despised? Was it, after all, such a great thing to be wealthy, that, failing in that aim, there should be no place for you and yours

to hide their heads in? Looking down into her heart, Mildie could not find the deep sympathy for her father's persistent misery she knew ought to be there.

"I believe I am a bad-tempered, hard creature," she said at last; "and there is no good in my talking to you, mamma, for I can't say anything you will like to hear. I will go and make tea for the boys, and bring you a cup to make up for the cold chocolate, if papa will only stay away long enough to give you time to drink it in peace."

"There's Harry!" exclaimed Mrs. West, who had turned to the window again, during Mildie's fit of silence, "coming home without his father."

"But he looks quite jolly," said Mildie; "he is nodding to us while he scrapes his feet. I'll run and let him in."

Though not given to bestow much attention on what went on around her, Mildred had received a vague impression during the last few weeks that some fresh cause of anxiety had arisen, connected with her father, which lay at the bottom of her mother's new fidget, as she called it, to have him safe at home before dark. The impression was deepened now, by the first look exchanged between her mother and Harry when he entered the room. She read in it a whole volume of secret fears that

perhaps had never found words on either side, and her curiosity and anxiety were fully aroused at last.

"All right, mother," Harry said, cheerfully, in spite of that first involuntary look. "He'll follow me in twenty minutes, or half an hour at latest. This time it's only that Cummins sent for him into his private room, about a letter that he had neglected to post. Yes," in a lower tone, "I could not help it; it would not have done for me to wait about for him while the other fellows were watching. He's sure to come straight home to-night, after the pulling up he'll have got from Cummins."

"Poor papa!" said Mrs. West, sighing. "Well, you'll come back after you have had your tea in the schoolroom; your father 'll be very low to-night, I'm afraid, but you'll come back and stay for the rest of the evening with me."

"All right," said Harry again, with just a shade of disappointment crossing his face.

"Make a good meal first, my boy. It is pleasanter for you there than here, I know," said Mrs. West, sighing, "and that is why I like you to take your meals with the younger ones, where you can talk as much as you like. I know it's sad and dull for you here."

"Oh, never fear for me," said Harry, brightly, "I shall do well enough, and as for eating, I am a whale to

eat anything that comes to hand anywhere. I only wish you and my father were likely to eat a tenth part of what I'm going in for just now."

He stooped to kiss his mother, and Mildie, whose conscience smote her with fear lest this "anything" he spoke about so glibly should not be forthcoming, rushed off to the schoolroom to ascertain that the boys had not drunk up all the milk and made deserts of the bread-and-butter plates, while she had been keeping them waiting for supper. For once fate, in the shape of an organ-man with a troop of performing canaries, had favoured her, by drawing the depredators out upon the leads; and when she had made tea in peace, and taken the promised cup to her mother, she sidled up to Harry, hoping to draw him into a little confidential talk before the boys came down. He had not brought as courageous a face into the schoolroom as he had shown to his mother, or something had happened since to depress his spirits. Mildie found him with his arms crossed on the mantelshelf, and his head laid down upon them, in a strangely disconsolate attitude for him. She had of late been daily growing in respect for her old tyrant, and would have surprised and even disgusted him a good deal if she had ventured to tell him her thoughts about the part he had been acting since this new stress of trouble set in. "Hero, indeed,

stuff and nonsense ; as if anyone could help doing for his father and mother what he did ! It just had to be done, and there was nothing to talk about." This new-born respect restrained her from roughly interrupting his reverie now, and she stood silently looking at the section of forehead and cheek visible above his arms, thinking there was a good deal of change here too, since Emmie went away. At last he raised his head and said abruptly :

"So she has come back, has she ? You've seen her, I suppose ?"

"Yes," said Mildie, disappointed that the conversation had taken that direction, "yes, I saw her, but she did not tell me anything. I took her some tea, and she sent me away directly afterwards."

"I shall have to carry her box upstairs, at all events ; there's no one but me to do it. How does she look ?"

"Oh, I don't know," answered Mildie. "I wish you would not worry about Christabel Moore when there's so much else to think about. *She* looks well enough. She can go away for a month and enjoy herself, and think nothing of us all the while."

"And why should she not ?" cried Harry fiercely. "We're not such pleasant people, as far as I know, for anyone to want to take thoughts of us away with

them on a holiday. We might as well let her enjoy herself without complaining."

"I did not mean to complain," pleaded Mildie; "and at all events you can't see her now, for she is busy writing letters to Katherine. I wish you'd talk to me a little about other things; it's so seldom you and I are alone together; and I should like to know—it would be a relief to me, Harry—what papa does, when he's out by himself, that makes mother so anxious, and that has turned you so—so—crusty," concluded Mildie, resolved not to err on the side of flattery, whatever her thoughts might be. "Tell me, once for all, what it is we have to fear."

"Where's the use of your knowing? You may be satisfied that it is bad enough," said Harry, covering his face with another groan. "Where's the use of bringing misery nearer by talking of it? It will come fast enough, I can tell you."

"I should like to be prepared for it, to know what to do."

"You'll not have anything to do in it. How should a girl like you?"

All Mildie's combativeness would have been roused by this speech three months ago, but she was learning womanly wisdom fast.

"I know I never am of much use," she said; "I'm too unlucky. But if you would trust me——"

"It is not that I don't trust you," groaned Harry; "I should be glad enough to have someone to talk to, now Emmie is away, only I hate a long yarn; and one does not know how to speak when it's one's own father, and one is so sorry for him, and knows that he has been badgered and tempted into it all. Stay, look here, you're quite old enough to take a hint," and to Mildie's surprise Harry stretched his hand to the book-case, drew out an old illustrated copy of "Master Humphrey's Clock," and opened it at the picture which shows little Nell seated in a corner of the inn kitchen, and watching, with startled sorrowful eyes, her old grandfather playing a game at cards in company with three sharpers, who exchange glances of satisfaction, as they note the imbecile expression of face with which he is choosing the card he is about to throw down.

"Can you remember," said Harry, with something like a sob in his voice, "the old times when we were small, and he used to tell us stories from these pictures after dinner, sitting on his knee by turns? Emmie used always to be frightened and cover her eyes when we came to this one."

"I recollect the dessert, and mamma's pretty evening

dresses, and the ornaments she let me play with, but I was too young then for the stories," answered Mildie.

"But you have read this book; you can guess what I want to tell you; you know why little Nell had to take her grandfather away from Mrs. Jallop's?"

"Because he gambled, and she was afraid he might be tempted to take Mrs. Jallop's money. So that is what you're afraid of? I did not know it was so bad as that," she added, turning again towards the picture, and looking with disgust at the cunning, foolish face of the poor old man. "I don't wonder that Emmie hated this picture."

Harry took the book from her hastily and thrust it back into its place.

"I don't hate it," he said slowly, after a minute's pause. "I think pretty often of it, and of the story as father used to tell it to Emmie and me. It comes back to me as he told it, and somehow seems to explain things. Poor father, he had not any notion then of what he would come to. It was all plain sailing with him then. He thought he'd come into life at the right end, at the top of the tree, and that it was his chief business to keep there, and to put us there. He's never been able to feel right anywhere else, and since he came down, he's always been looking, first in one

way and then in another, for the stroke of good luck that was to put him back again, till at last—well," said Harry, putting his finger to his forehead, "I suppose one can't go on expecting impossibilities and being disappointed every day of one's life, without it's telling on one's brain in the end, and when it comes to that, one's not responsible. Making money is a sort of mania with him now, since he took to haunting places of an evening where he can bet and play for money."

"Where does he get the money to play with?"

"Ah, that's it!" said Harry. "I think he has borrowed a good deal lately from Uncle Rivers, and other old acquaintances, who used to pity and respect him till now, when he's taken to begging, poor father,—he who used to be so proud—but they are not likely to go on supplying him long. Cheques and notes pass through his hands sometimes at the office, and Cummins has such a spite against him, and is so tired out with his muddling and mistakes, that I believe he'd rather catch him out once in a fault of that kind, and make a show of magnanimity to a fallen man by merely dismissing him, than put up with him in the office much longer."

"And Mr. Cummins sent for father to-day as you were leaving. Oh, Harry, and you said 'all right' when you went in to mamma!"

"It's more likely than not to be one of the everyday rowings, and one must keep up one's spirits as long as one can."

Mildie put her hand on Harry's shoulder and said, half under her breath: "You've got to bear the anxiety all by yourself; it's very good of you."

"Nonsense!" cried Harry; but a quiver passed over his face, and he did not shake off Mildie's hand. They stood a moment together in silence, and then Mildie asked, in a subdued, awe-struck voice:

"You don't think father ever will do *that*—about the cheques?"

"Not if he quite knows what he is doing; but when people get muddled by thinking night and day just of that one thing, winning money, and when temptation is constantly put in their way on purpose—but, no, what I am really afraid of, is appearances turning against him accidentally, and Cummins, who has, I know, been looking out for a chance of getting rid of him, taking advantage of this habit to put him in the wrong."

"I almost wish it would come," said Mildie, "the worst that has to come, and that it was well over. If we go with a great crash quite down to the ground, we shall get up again, like Antæus, you know."

"No, I don't," said Harry; "never heard of the

beggar. Let him slide; what has he to do with us?"

"Ah well!" said Mildie; "what I mean is, that I should like to make a fresh start, washing our hands of this big gloomy house, and the pictures of rich old Aldermen Wests on the walls, and the pretence of late dinners, and the calling ourselves ladies and gentlemen. I should like to begin again at the bottom and see what we could do. We would all work. Yes, you may laugh at me, but I could, Harry, I could black grates, and scrub and drudge, if I'm fit for nothing else, for I have been doing it lately, though nobody has known anything about it."

"I have," answered Harry, putting his arm round Mildie's waist, and taking away her breath by actually kissing her on the forehead. "You're a brave girl, Mildie, I'll say that for you, though you are a bit of a pedant, and I've noticed, if no one else has, how pluckily you've put your shoulder to the wheel lately. You'll show yourself a regular brick, I'll answer for that, when the worst comes."

"I wish it were come, then," said Mildie, glowing under this immense praise. "With you to help me, Harry, I should not mind anything."

"But we don't know what the worst will be yet,"

groaned Harry. "You're a brick, as I observed before" (stooping down and kissing her again), "you and I can stand up against whatever happens; but there's the others to think for—my mother, and Emmie, and the poor old governor. I don't know how he'd bear another fall, or where it would take him to. There, you'd better pour out the tea. Is not that the kitchen clock striking seven? I'll get my tea, and if he has not turned up by that time, I'll stroll out again to see if I can hear anything of him, at any of his usual places. It will be better than sitting still, anyhow."

The meal was over before any interruption came, and Mildie followed Harry out into the hall for the sake of hovering about him while he took his hat and looked into the drawing-room to say a few cheering words to his mother, before he left the house.

"You might bring Christabel Moore down to sit with mother while I'm away," he suggested wistfully, when he had reached the hall door. While Mildie was searching her mind for some inoffensive way of insinuating that his panacea of comfort did not equally suit their mother, a new direction was given to her thoughts, by some sounds outside the house that seemed to fill her ears, and arrest the beating of her pulses, as no sound, no ear-piercing shriek or wail of woe, had

ever done before. Yet they were the merest everyday sounds, footsteps approaching and pausing before the house, and rapid wheels stopping suddenly at their door.

"Dr. Urquhart coming back," observed Harry, who had heard, and strangely enough turned pale at these common occurrences too.

"It's not Dr. Urquhart," said Mildie, in a whisper.

"There!" cried Harry, pushing her towards the dining-room door. "Go in there to mother, and keep her from looking out of the window, whatever you do, while I see what it is. Do go at once."

But the precaution was a second too late. Mrs. West had resumed her watch at the window the instant Harry left her, and, while he was speaking, the dining-room door opened, and she came out with a marble face, and an expression in her eyes that Mildie never forgot.

"Open the door, Harry dear," she said. "It's—it's—your father; they are bringing him home—ill—I think. Quick, dears—let me pass. I'll go myself; he must not be kept waiting—I must get to him quick."

Mildie, in wild terror at her looks, threw her arms about her to keep her back, and Harry went to the door and opened it wide. At the bottom of the steps there was a little procession, two or three men carrying a heavy something which seemed lately to have been

lifted out of a cab that was drawn up near. At the top stood Mr. Cummins, white and agitated, and in a hurry to speak. He seized Harry's arm to keep him from running down the steps, and forced him back into the house.

"Keep your mother and sister out of the way for Heaven's sake," he whispered. "Take them somewhere before *that* comes into the house. I hurried on here to prepare—to explain—to save you the first shock, if I could. Get your mother out of the way, at least."

"What is it?" asked Harry, hoarsely.

"A fit. There *may* be life left; we don't know. I sent for a doctor and he is there, with the—with your father, bringing him in. It all happened in a minute. He had got up to leave the room, and just as he reached the door, he fell down as if he had been shot. I had been speaking to him quite quietly."

"Yes; I daresay," said Harry, between his teeth. "Let go my arm, if you please." Then, as Mr. Cummins tightened, rather than loosened, his grasp, horrified at the deep unspoken condemnation which those stern young eyes burned down into his very soul, Harry threw him off, sending him staggering forward into the hall, and rushed down the steps to meet the slowly-mounting

procession. Four men carrying a limp recumbent figure between them.

"You had better go back, you had better not come near just yet," a kind, professional voice said in his ear.

But Harry did not heed the words; he only saw a poor, worn, iron-grey head and a white face swaying wretchedly backwards and forwards, and he pushed the figure nearest it away, and took it on his own shoulder. The white forehead touched his cheek as he bent down, and the half-closed eyes seemed to look cloudily, but with a strange, still, dignified calmness into his. He had never felt a chill like the chill of that touch, never seen that film in any eyes before, but he knew by instinct what it meant, and, strange to say, the feeling that first rushed into his mind was not grief so much as a sad, solemn triumph. Out of the reach of human scorn at least, snatched away from the trouble that was too strong for him.

The fever called living is conquered at last.

A thought something like this rose in Harry's mind, calming the anger which the sight of Mr. Cummins had excited, lifting him for a little while above the sting of grief and the pangs of pity. His mother's face, as white almost as the face on his shoulder, met his eyes the

instant he had lifted his burden over the threshold, but her agonised look did not overcome his courage, for he had a word of comfort ready.

"He is safe, mother," he said, gently. "Look at him; he has got away from it all. Let us carry him upstairs to rest."

Yes, he has escaped from the long, long struggle, the frantic grasp after shadows which he sees now had no substance behind them; escaped, indeed, but with empty hands, with nothing to show for his gift of life, no thankfulness even, only long, long years of disquieting himself in vain; dust and ashes of regret stored in his soul, for possessions whose worthlessness he recognises now—clearly enough—now that he has got away from the misleading glare that had bewildered his vision, into the daylight of God's countenance at last.

Dr. Urquhart returned home in the midst of the sad confusion, and quietly took upon himself the necessary arrangements, while Christabel carried off the two boys to "Air Throne," and devoted herself to keeping them out of the way of the elder mourners. It was Dr. Urquhart, who, quite late at night, raised the question, which no one had thought of till then, of how the news of her father's sudden death was to be conveyed to Emmie.

No one liked the thought of her receiving it by letter so far from home, with no possibility open to her of returning at once to those whose grief she would long to alleviate. When at last Mrs. West had been persuaded to go to bed, Mildie, Harry, and Dr. Urquhart met in a sad little conclave in the back sitting-room to consult what should be done.

"If I could but be spared to run down to the south of France myself, and bring her back in time for the funeral," said Dr. Urquhart, with a sudden light on his face, which somehow jarred on Mildie's over-strung nerves terribly. "If I could go, I could perhaps break the news to her better than anyone else, having been on the spot, I mean. It would of course be a great shock. She would bear the tidings best from someone who came direct from home. Don't you think so?" he added, turning for counsel to Mildie, in the anxiety which, on this one matter, was strong enough to make him distrust his own judgment.

Miserable as she was, Mildie had time for a recollection of passages in Emmie's letters which caused her to feel a little contemptuously towards Dr. Urquhart's certainty that he could comfort her sister.

"It would not be at all a good plan," she pronounced, steadily. "Mamma will want you here; and

besides, you could not take Emmie away from Aunt Rivers, unless someone went out with you to fill her place. Uncle Rivers is the proper person to bring Emmie back to us, and Alma must go out with him, and take care of her own mother. Mamma will ask for Emmie as soon as she begins to care for anything that is left."

"Of course," replied Dr. Urquhart. "Your sister's return is the only thing to cheer her at all."

"And Uncle Rivers must bring her," persisted Mildie. "We ought perhaps to have sent to him and Alma at once, but there would have been no use, we should not have found them at home. I daresay they are coming back from some grand party at the Kirkmans or the Forrests just now."

It was decided, before the council broke up, that Dr. Urquhart should call at Eccleston Square early on the next morning to acquaint Sir Francis with the state of affairs in Saville Street. If no more time were lost, Dr. Urquhart thought it possible he might make the journey to La Roquette, and return in time to attend the funeral.

"A token of respect which he would, no doubt," Dr. Urquhart said, "be anxious to pay to his brother-in-law and the family."

"As if that could do *him* or us any good," Mildie said in a low voice, as she turned away to go back to her mother. "As if we any of us wanted pretences *now*."

Mildie was to sleep with her mother in Mrs. Urquhart's room to-night. But before she began to undress, she went into that other room which had changed its character so strangely since morning, from a commonplace bedroom to a stately presence-chamber. It was empty when Mildie entered, except for the still form that lay on the bed, its features sharpened already, showing under the white sheet that covered it. Mildie did not put back the folds or look at the face; alas, of late years it had not been a lovable or loving sight to her. A great cloud of something had veiled all its fatherliness from her, more thickly than the white sheet shrouded the irresponsive features now, and to bring back the father she could honestly weep for, she must look back a long way.

She knelt by the bed, and covering her face with her hands, searched her memory for old, old recollections that could wake up the filial regrets she hated herself for not experiencing more vividly. That time when, a very little thing, she had fallen down on the stairs, and her father had picked her up tenderly, and carried her to the

nursery; and that summer vacation, when they had all gone into the country together, before their misfortunes began, and he had been very good to them all. Mildie was sure she could quite recollect a ride on his shoulder, and that she had helped to bury him in a sand mausoleum on the shore. On one of her birthdays he had called her to him and kissed her quite of his own accord, and he had praised her diligence only the other day when, coming by chance into the schoolroom, he had found her absorbed in a German book. Yes, yes; there was this time and that, little sparklets of gold, gems of love and kindness, showing among all that blank darkness, to be remembered for ever, to live on in memory now that an end had come to all else, now that no opportunity could come for another such word, for another claim on a daughter's love to be made by him who lay there, her father, the only earthly father she could ever have, though this was all she knew of him.

Mildie bowed her head and thanked God for the little store she had culled, the precious store, the few words, and looks, and thoughts her father had been able to spare to his child, from that daily and nightly absorption in sordid cares, which the world had exacted of him, and repaid him for yielding it, by emptying his life of all true life, and breaking his heart at last.

CHAPTER XII.

A CONFERENCE.

He either fears his fate too much,
Or his desert is small,
Who dares not put it to the touch,
To win or lose it all.

"WELL, Horace, my boy, where's the use of going on arguing? I suppose it never happened yet that a young man's mother has exactly the same opinion of the girl he is going to marry as he has himself, more especially when the young man is an only son, and the mother, poor soul, has been all her life in the way of thinking nothing good enough for his having. I'm not going to quarrel with you for not being as exacting of what is due to you as I am. No, nor yet for disliking to take up the cudgels on my account, when I'm tempted to think that the girl who professes to love you might make a little more of your mother. I say nothing about that."

"I am sorry enough you should have occasion to complain, mother," answered Horace, gloomily. "You

can't think it pleases me to see you overlooked; but as to what you say about professing to love me—don't let us make *her* out a hypocrite, there's not been so much profession of the kind that we need talk about it."

"The more shame for her then, I say," cried Mrs. Kirkman, fanning herself vigorously; "there it is where I do lose patience. Open the window a crack, will you, Horace, for I feel suffocating. It's either that the weather is unnaturally hot for April—or else—I am getting stouter and stouter till it'll be a mercy if your Miss Rivers don't send me off in an apoplectic fit some fine morning, with her shilly-shally and her vagaries. No, I'm not going to call her names; 'hussy' was on my lips, but I know it don't become me to say it, or you to hear, but I've a right to speak my thoughts out to my own son, and I *will* say that it's a shame for her to have as good as promised to marry you at the end of the season, which ain't far off now, if she don't love you as you deserve to be loved, my boy."

"A man deserves in that way what he can get, I suppose, mother," said Horace, a little proudly and sadly; "and if he chooses, to give *all* for nothing, it's his own look-out, I believe; no one can mend the matter to him by talking about it."

"My poor boy!" said Mrs. Kirkman, putting down

her fan to pat her son's broad, brown hand, which hung over the back of her chair, against which he had been leaning during a long conversation, started by the arrival of a little twisted note from Alma Rivers; which little note, at the end of half an hour, lay open on the table before them, still unanswered.

"My poor boy!"

"You need not pity me, mother," Horace answered, in a pained, sulky tone. "I hate pity! Let me manage my own affairs without your interference or my father's, and they'll come right enough, I daresay. She and I understand each other. I don't go in for sentiment myself to the extent that some people do, and if she likes to make the most of her time of keeping me in suspense, it's what every woman enjoys, I am told. It will end as we wish, provided my father and you consent to let her alone, and don't put up her pride by perpetually requiring her to tack herself on to us wherever we choose to take her."

"But that's just what your father does expect, and I warn you he won't bear any contradiction about it. He ain't what some people calls sensitive; he has put up with a good deal in his time, but now he feels he has got beyond all that, and other people should begin to put up with whims of his, if he chooses to start 'em. It's his

whim just now to make a figure in society, and in picking a wife for you he has chosen a girl he thought likely to help him. He has not stood out for money to match what he can give you, nor yet for rank—though he believes you could have had that for the asking. He does not care to put you and your wife at the top of the tree, and for him and me to be looked down upon by your wife's people; his thought was to connect ourselves with a family that had risen, but who had gone in for reputation and making their way into society, while he ground on at the money-making till he'd got it up to the mark he had set before himself. The Riverses seemed to have hit his thoughts exactly. They manage to be well received everywhere, and yet we know enough of their beginnings to feel quite at ease with them. I've had it in my mind scores of times, when Lady Rivers has been talking to me about 'my lady this,' and 'the countess that,' and her court dresses, and her confidential maid, to put her in mind of a day when I dropped in at her old home in Darlington, and caught her and her sister with fingers the colour of a mallow, dyeing their last year's ribbons to retrim their hats for assize week, when Frank Rivers and his friend Mr. West were expected down from London. I let her talk as if we'd neither of us done a hand's-turn of useful work in our lives, but I'm

ready to laugh in her face all the while, and the recollection don't dispose me to encourage Miss Alma in giving herself the airs of a duchess, before your father and me. If she'd shown the same pride when we first knew her, as she's treated us to lately, you'd never have had leave to make up to her, I can tell you, Horace."

"I might have done it all the same, mother; yo and my father seem to have taken it into your heads that I have likings to order, but you are wrong there. I did not fall in love with Miss Rivers to further my father's plans, I can assure you, and I can't and shan't change my feelings towards her because he's not satisfied with the bargain he thought he'd made. You had better let him know as much."

"Nay, nay! it has not come to anything of the kind yet," said Mrs. Kirkman soothingly. "I only meant to put you on your mettle, so to speak, that you may let the young lady see you are not to be trifled with. It's all very well to talk about feelings, and I respect you for having 'em, my boy, but all the same we can't shut our eyes to it, that they are not the first things exactly to be thought of in this case. Where would you be if your father turned crusty, and sent you to Miss Rivers with nothing but your feelings to speak to her about? Not even in as good a position

as your father was when he came for me long ago, for you've not been brought up to work as he was; and though I don't think little of you, as you know, my boy, I don't take you to be such a man as your father."

"And whose fault is it, mother, that I have never been allowed to work? I'm always being twitted with my idleness, and the contrast with my father, but what opportunity have I had of doing as he did? He prides himself on having crowded the business of a dozen lives into one, and of leaving nothing for me to do. He surely need not reproach me for being what he has worked so hard to make me! How does he know that I should not have liked work and independence better than the life he thrusts upon me? I can tell you I am often sick enough of it. I don't need you to tell me what a poor figure I cut, or how little chance there is of Miss Rivers taking me, except for my father's money."

"Tush! tush! Your father made the money with toil enough, and plenty of enemies alongside of it to grudge and carp at some of his plans in getting it together. All he asks of you is to spend it creditably and please yourself, with a thought to his pleasure and credit too, which don't seem to me a very hard bargain.

Come, come, Horace, don't let us get into the dolefuls for next to nothing."

"It is something to me, however, if my father expects me to quarrel with Miss Rivers, after all he's done to bring us together."

"It's to prevent a quarrel, not to make one, that I advise you to show some spirit to-day. So long as a woman fancies she can twist her lover round her finger she never knows the hold he has on her heart. Let Miss Alma see that there is something you insist upon, above pleasing her whims, and she'll soon come to her senses, and think more of you than she has ever done yet. I know women, if even, as I see you are thinking by your obstinate face, Horace, my dear, I am not equal to understanding your sweetheart. It don't alter human nature, that ever I've heard, to be able to speak a dozen foreign languages and play on the piano, no, nor to have worn kid gloves and led a useless life ever since you was born; you're a woman when all's said and done, and you can't bring yourself to think much of a man who is soft enough to knock under to you at every turn. You may take my word for that."

"I don't doubt the wisdom of your advice, so far as it goes," said Horace slowly. And then he rose

from his leaning posture over his mother's chair, and, strolling to the window, stood with his arms folded, looking out. He wished with all his soul that he could take his mother's view of the case, and credit Alma with so much genuine regard for him that an assumption of loving authority on his part would awaken a response of womanly tenderness on hers. He tried to imagine a lover's quarrel between them, which should be, as his Eton Latin Grammar had taught him, "the renewing of love." *Renewing!* Had there ever been a beginning of love on her side? Could he, looking back on all the variations of manner that so engrossed him—kind, coquettish, fascinating, indifferent—fix on a single look or word in all their intercourse that had quite satisfied him, at the time, as evidence of the feeling he was always looking for, and never exactly finding? He did not expect or wish for sentiment, as he often reminded himself, but a certain genuine preference he did feel to be necessary. He could not quite reconcile himself to the thought of being taken simply for what he had to give, however satisfactory such homage to the magnitude of their possessions might be to his father. He wanted something for himself, some sort of recognition, and he thought, as he stood taking stock, as it were, of his own love and the strength

of his own feelings towards Alma, that there was that in him which gave him a right to demand it. Perhaps his mother was right, and he had damaged himself by yielding to Alma's caprice. He ought to have resented the slights she had put upon his mother—that fond good mother, whose oddities and vulgarities he, in his better moments, hated himself for despising in his worst.

“Well,” he said, coming back to his mother's chair when he had worked off part of his irritation by pulling a heavy blind-tassel to pieces. “Well, what is it you want me to do about this note of Alma's? She apologises to you for throwing over her engagement to go with us to Hurlingham on Thursday week, but she makes no allusion to my disappointment. Would you have me remonstrate when I see her to-night at Lady Forrest's ball?”

“For which you've never had a proper invitation, let me remind you; only a verbal intimation from Alma that you may go if you like, and no word about your father or me.”

“That is not her fault, and if the Forrests choose to keep to their own set, we can do without them; it is nothing to us.”

“It will be something to you, Horace, when you've

married, if your wife gets carried by her sister into a set where you are looked down upon. You said yourself that you got shoved up into a corner and hardly had a word with Alma the whole evening, the last time you were at Lady Forrest's. I would not put myself in the way of being so slighted before my future wife's very eyes, if I were you. Let Alma miss you to-night, and write her a letter to bring her to her senses about Thursday. Tell her your father will be seriously offended if she breaks her engagement. He's invited a large party on the strength of her promise, swells whom he don't trust me to entertain without someone who understands them to back me up. No, I don't want you to put it exactly in that way, Horace. I daresay I should if I were to write, for I never can get anything said but what I mean when I put pen to paper, but you've had education enough to fit you to tell white lies in a letter. You'd better begin at once, for I'm going out soon, and I want you to come with me to Gunter's to order the luncheon for Thursday. You young men understand good eating nowadays, and are twice as critical as we old housekeepers."

"Very well, mother, I'll write here. You had better give me half an hour," glancing at the writing-table with a look of disgust, as if it were an instrument of

torture to which he was about to deliver himself up for that space of time.

"That's right," said Mrs. Kirkman, encouragingly ; "I'll leave you alone. One does a thing of that kind easier when one's alone, and can pull all the faces over it one feels inclined to. I'll go and ask your father if he's any suggestions to make about the lunch-basket on Thursday. He wants it to be something very special, quite regardless of——but there, I beg your pardon, Horry, I know that's one of the phrases you don't like to hear from my lips so often, though why, when one is spending one's money freely, and has been looking forward to nothing else all one's life, one should be afraid to talk about it, is more than I shall ever understand."

Horace's Eton education, though it did him good service in a thousand ways that had not entered into his father's calculation of the uses of learning, had failed to raise him as far above letter-writing difficulties as his mother supposed ; and, but for a certain dogged resoluteness of nature that forbade him to fail in accomplishing a given task in a given time, the end of the half-hour would have found him with nothing to show for his application.

"My dear Alma," he wrote, and then he sat staring at the words and biting the end of a pen viciously for fully

twenty-five minutes. It chanced that he had never written a note to Alma since their semi-engagement. He was not fond of writing, and he had hitherto never allowed a single day to pass without managing a meeting, and the exchange of a few bright, gossipy words somewhere; and now the combined thoughts that he was about to write to her, and that he should not see her for twenty-four hours, filled his mind blankly and hindered his progress. What sort of a look would there be on her face, he kept asking himself, when he came for an answer to this letter of remonstrance? Judging her obstinacy by his own, he thought he would avoid being hard upon it. He would make the yielding as easy as possible. He would write such a note as should need no answer but the gracious, good-humoured consent to his request, which she would surely not refuse when he came taking it for granted. He would show his resolution by letter, and in her sweet presence reward her yielding by steadily ignoring that there had ever been any contest of wills between them.

He was pleasing himself with this thought when he heard his mother's steps reascending the stairs to her boudoir, and pushing away his first sheet, where he had scrawled Alma's name a dozen times, he seized another and wrote rapidly, knitting his brows and setting his

teeth with the same sort of resolution he would have called up to take a desperate leap, or face a perilous crag in mountain climbing.

“MY DEAR ALMA,

“I have been much astonished and hurt at the contents of the note my mother received from you this morning. I take it for granted that you had not, when making the engagement you speak of as likely to prevent you from keeping your promise to my father and mother for Thursday week, taken into consideration all the inconvenience and annoyance your withdrawal from the party arranged for you would occasion them, and I therefore scribble off a hasty line to entreat you to reconsider your plans. I say nothing about my own disappointment at losing the long day in your company I am looking forward to, severe as this would be; the chief point with me this morning is to be assured that you did not intentionally prefer other friends to my father and mother and myself. I don't want to be exacting as to your time or attention, but I think, dearest Alma, that I have a right to take it for granted that you do feel something more to be due to them and me than other, if even older, friends can claim from you. What does the promise you made to me three months ago mean but this? I have

been very patient, but when feelings are so strong as mine, there is a limit to patience. I shall not expect an answer to this letter, but shall hope to find you ready to join the party for Hurlingham when I call for you."

The last three sentences were written with a dash, the pen-point driving into the thick creamy paper with an energy meant to assure himself that his hand was not trembling at all, and that he did not feel as if any great stake for him hung on the mood in which those words would be read by-and-by. Then he sighed and folded the sheet without reading it over, and came forward to meet his mother, wearing the most nonchalant air he could put on.

"You'd better let me post your letter to Miss Rivers," said Mrs. Kirkman, a little doubtful of this ostentatious display of resolution. "Your father has actually been talking to me about her, just as if he'd guessed what there was in that twisted note. There never was such a thing yet done as to get on his blind side. He sees further through a deal board than anyone I ever came across, and he ain't at all satisfied with the way your engagement is going on. I hope you've put it strongly to Alma about behaving herself on Thursday,

for if she don't you'll have all the fat in the fire, I can tell you."

"The what, mother?" asked Horace, gloomily.

"I've said it," answered Mrs. Kirkman. "And dear me, Horry, I take pains enough when I'm in company to keep back the expressions that come natural to me; if I may not say what I like, as I like, when I'm alone with you, my life won't be worth having. I often think how glad I should be to awake some morning and find myself in our old house at Darlington, with your father a clerk at the ironworks again, and friends about us with whom I need not be on my P's and Q's. If you're not to be happy—if you don't get what you want—I shall begin to wonder what we ever made all this fuss about, for it don't seem to be doing any of us much good." Mrs. Kirkman's broad red face actually wrinkled up piteously as she finished her sentence, and tears filled her eyes and began to overflow slowly. It was such an unusual sight that, shaken for the moment out of his usual crust, Horace stooped down and kissed her affectionately.

"Never mind, old mother, we'll make it out somehow," he said. "But you'd better leave me to post the letter to Miss Rivers. I should not like to have it taken out of my hands in such a fashion as that."

He carried it about with him in his pocket all

day, feeling a certain satisfaction and sense of safety in keeping it in his own power, and diminishing as far as was prudent the interval between Alma's receipt of the letter and his next interview with her, when he could do as he liked about making concessions. Wondering, too, in his vague way, that his first love-letter should be of such an uncomfortable character; and that he should care so extravagantly about it that when at last he did drop it into a letter-box in time to reach Eccleston Square by the latest post, such an agony of anxiety seized him, that nothing but the certainty that no amount of bribery or entreaty would be of any use, prevented him from rushing into the post-office and demanding to have it returned.

CHAPTER XIII.

“RETREAT.”

“Love seeketh not itself to please,
Nor for itself hath any care,
But for another gives its ease,
And builds a heaven in hell’s despair.”

So sang a little clod of clay,
Trodden with the cattles’ feet,
But a pebble of the brook
Warbled out these metres meet :

“Love seeketh only *self* to please,
To bind another to its delight,
Joys in another’s loss of ease,
And builds a hell in heaven’s despite.”

THE note that had cost so much discussion, and been sent on its way with so many misgivings, reached Alma very early on the morning of the next day, on her return from a ball at Lady Forrest’s, to which her father had accompanied her. They had gone into Sir Francis’s study on entering the house, and while they were waiting for some tea, Sir Francis, as was his wont, began to peer about for any notes or newspapers that might have come in since he left the room a few hours before.

“May not the letters, if there are any, wait till

breakfast-time? I'm sure we are too tired to care about them now," said Alma, languidly.

"Ah," cried Sir Francis, looking keenly at her, "you are tired, you did not enjoy yourself this evening. I don't generally notice such matters, but it struck me that something was wrong with you. How was it your indefatigable attendant was not in waiting to-night as usual? But (with a keen smile) I should not have thought *that* omission especially provocative of fatigue. Constance seemed merry enough, and, by-the-way, who was that young fellow who danced with her so many times, and with whom her little ladyship giggled a good deal in her old style, I thought, at supper? One of the younger generation of Forrest cousins, who have taken her up in despite of the elders, I suppose, as she makes so much of him."

"Papa," cried Alma, "is it possible you did not know him? Do you not remember young Lawrence, Frank's great friend, who was so often with us at Shanklin, the winter we spent there before Frank went to India? Have you forgotten all about him?"

And Alma wondered, with a sore feeling of indignation swelling her heart, whether her father would take Wynyard Anstice for one of Horace Kirkman's relations, if he met him in her married home a year or so hence,

forgetting all that had gone before. But no, Wynyard was not a person to be so easily forgotten.

"You certainly are not an observing person, papa," she added.

"My dear, I have other things to think about; but I do remember young Lawrence now you recall my thoughts to him. Your mother got into a great fright about him, and sent for me to come to Shanklin at a very inconvenient moment, I remember, to act bugbear and keep him out of the house. I don't think I saw him half-a-dozen times. Constance was supposed to have been smitten by his charms, was she not? But she was a mere child then, who ought not to have been thinking of anything but her blackboard and her 'Mangnall's Questions.' Perhaps I ought to be more observing. However, that is Sir John's business now, as far as silly little Conny is concerned. He's old enough to take care of his wife, one would think. How comes he to let an old lover of hers hang about the house and dance with her half the evening, before a score or so of critical Forrest relations? Do you suppose he knows anything about their past acquaintance?"

"Papa," cried Alma, astonished again, "you know very little about Constance if you think she can ever have found sufficient courage to tell such a tale to Sir John Forrest."

"I should have thought, however, that it required more courage, and a sort of courage I am sorry to credit a child of mine with, to dance and giggle with a young fop like that before her husband's very eyes. If Constance is so timid, how comes she to risk offending her husband so outrageously?"

"She does not mean any harm, poor child, she is carried away by the excitement of the moment; and I think even you must know by this time, papa, that there is never much likelihood of Sir John's noticing particularly anything that takes place after dinner. He was asleep in a corner of the billiard-room nearly all this evening."

"Ah, I begin to feel sadly afraid your mamma made a mistake there, and that that marriage will turn out a bad business; but he is not always asleep?"

"Not quite always, and he is exacting and jealous enough when he is awake, but Constance can always humour and satisfy him when she pleases. One gets used to it," said Alma in a low, sad tone.

She was thinking of herself as well as of Constance, and feeling with a keen sense of self-degradation, how easy the descent was from daily false seeming, such as must inevitably come of living in false relations with the people about you, to actual false speaking and distinctly

dishonest deeds. Was it a descent on which one could stop oneself? Her father first broke the silence into which they had fallen.

"Well, I had nothing to do with it. I really was too busy to see enough of what went on to be a fair judge, and your mother assured me that Constance was left perfectly free, and that she chose for herself."

"Yes, it was all put before her very strongly, and she thought herself that she should not like poverty. I suppose we none of us do; it is the one evil that can be put before one, the other evils are left out of sight."

"I wish your mother were well enough to come home. Her authority over Conny is sadly needed. It is most unlucky that she should be away this spring."

"It would make her miserable to bring her back to this," said Alma. "Papa, you will not blame me now, will you, when I shirk engagements with the Kirkmans, to keep close to Constance?"

"You are a good child," said Sir Francis, affectionately. "I will trust you to do what you think best. You have more sense than all the others put together; and you, at all events, shall be left at liberty to act and judge for yourself."

"Thank you, papa," said Alma, drawing her head back to escape the kiss he would have given, "but it is

a little late, is it not, to say that? Here comes my tea—and letters.”

There were two, one was from La Roquette, and both were for Alma. As she took them up, Sir Francis asked the servant if anyone had inquired for him during the evening, or if any telegram had arrived.

“Did you expect one?” Alma asked, when the servant had left the room.

“I am very glad to escape, I can tell you, for you have given me bad news enough for one evening; but I confess I am anxious. I met an old friend of the Wests’ this evening, who gave me a hint to expect fresh trouble in Saville Street. He had heard a rumour that poor West had been carried home from his office in a fit or something of the kind to-day. I rather expected to find I had been sent for, but as there seems to be no message, we will hope, for the next six or seven hours at least, that his illness has been exaggerated. You have finished your tea, I see; had we not better go to bed, and try to get as much sleep as circumstances admit of, to fit us for to-morrow’s budget of worries?”

Alma took the hint, and carried her letters upstairs, but she did not act on her father’s advice when she got to her own room. Her eye had fallen on a sentence in her mother’s letter which made it quite impossible to

leave the reading of all the rest till the next morning and so soon as she was disencumbered of her ball-dress, and had let down the heavy ropes of hair from her aching head, she unfolded the thin sheets. She read and re-read, turning back to consider particular phrases, and feeling as she did so that it mattered little, as far as she was concerned, that the hours for sleep her father called so precious were stealing away, and the faint light of an April dawn creeping into the London sky, for the thoughts her mother's letter had called up were effectual banishers of slumber for her. This was the letter which Lady Rivers had written, while she and Emmie sat opposite each other, waiting for Wynyard's arrival with the *charette*, on the afternoon of Madame de Florimel's birthday *fête*. The sentence to which Alma's eyes oftenest turned back, was the one that had caused Lady Rivers to look up and study Emmie's figure in her gala dress, when she finished writing its last word. "Emmie West and your old friend Wynyard Anstice have set up quite a marked flirtation since he turned up so unexpectedly here. I always told you he was a flirt, and very easily won, but I think this last fancy of his will turn out to be the right thing for him, and that he is in earnest *at last*."

Alma laid the letter aside after a while, and sat thinking, with her hands clasped tightly over the folded

sheets. Her face had flushed, and her lips curled contemptuously as she read, but gradually the colour and the angry light on her face ebbed away, and left it only profoundly sad and troubled. The effect of that subtly-concocted sentence was very different from what her mother had anticipated when she penned it. Alma's struggle with herself, as she sat watching the daylight steal into her room, was not waged against wounded feelings or disappointment at being supplanted so soon in her rejected lover's heart. She simply did not believe her mother's statement, and the feeling aroused was one of indignation against what she took to be a manœuvre designed to drive her with more headlong speed into the Kirkmans' arms.

She tried hard not to be bitter against her mother, and the careful study of the letter had been chiefly for the sake of dwelling on words and phrases that told of suffering and low spirits. She must not, she told herself, grow angry with her sick mother—but, oh, what a vista of petty manœuvres—little shoves this way and that—innuendoes which further experience proved untrue—did not that sentence open up in her memory. It bore such a likeness to a hundred other sayings of the same kind; it owed its origin so clearly to the same promptings, that it was difficult not to let it reawaken all the old buried heart-burnings. And then Alma, having for-

bidden herself to blame her mother, turned the weight of her indignation against herself. Was she a log, without any will or conscience of her own, to be shoved this way and that? She fancied she could read the whole matter clearly just now, and quite easily discern the misrepresentations her mother's prejudices had thrown over Wynyard's conduct. But why had she not been as clear-sighted formerly? Why had not the strong confidence in his fidelity which made her ready to smile now at the notion of his preferring anyone to herself, come to her in old times, when her mother had made her doubt him?

Was it that the mention of a real living rival had stung her to keener jealousy than had been called forth by the old grudge against his disinterestedness which she had once found bitter? Had the deeper pain opened her eyes to the true state of her heart at last? To-night there seemed to be wonderfully little substance in her former complaints against him. She could not set them up on their feet again, or make them look anything but self-made shadows, which she had permitted to hide the reality of her own feelings from herself, and which now shrank away, leaving the truth bare. Anxious fears for Constance mingled with fears about herself, and bit by bit she recalled the days when Constance's fate was

being decided upon. The small reasons—the ephemeral bribes—the paltry worldly motives that had been held before her, to lure her on to take an empty loveless life—a life from which there was no escape—none—save the one which Alma shuddered to remember *did* actually open upon the road Constance was thoughtlessly treading. That gate of swift descent, that short cut to hell, of which no one had warned her as possibly lying contiguous to the way they had represented as so safe and sure, so easy for tender feet to travel along.

Alma forcibly wrenched her thoughts away from these dark forebodings, and hoping to bring herself down into an everyday region, she took up the second note at which she had hardly looked before. The handwriting was familiar, and so was the gorgeous monogram and the seal she proceeded to break open with a languid curiosity. She had wondered a little at Horace Kirkman's absence from her sister's ball, and been in fact somewhat relieved not to see him, as it left her more at liberty to attend to other guests, and ward off remarks on Constance's preoccupation; and now she prepared herself to read an elaborate apology and expressions of regret she could not by any means echo. The tone of the letter as she glanced through it took her greatly by surprise. Being in a highly-wrought mood, she

read it with that keen intuition of the unexpressed feeling of the writer, which comes sometimes when the sympathies are widely awake. She read Horace Kirkman's thoughts through his imperfect expression of them, and divined how much importance he had attached to phrases that said so little. She had never felt so complacently towards him as when she came to the closing sentence, and felt with a rush of joy that it opened a way of escape, for which a minute ago she had been vaguely longing. She rose and went to her desk without a moment's pause, determined to answer the letter at once; truthfully, she resolved, while the truest words he had ever spoken to her were calling forth an answering impulse towards openness and honesty in her heart. She did not think much of the pain the hasty words she scribbled would certainly give the person to whom they were addressed. A bitter mood of self-contempt had followed her reflections, and the glimpse she had just had of something real and true in Horace's feeling towards her, had opened her eyes to the injustice of the bargain she had been on the point of making. If he could care much for anything beyond pomp and show and worldly success, then she had no right to take him, and the only amends she could make was to put an end to the deception at once. He was too good for her after

all, this man whom she had trifled with and despised, a great deal too good for a woman who had been ready to marry him for her own convenience, while she knew that there was not one feeling of honest preference for him in her heart. These were the thoughts that flowed in an undercurrent through Alma's mind, while her fingers rapidly wrote sentences that certainly would not carry any impression of her self-humiliation or remorse to the person who was to read them.

"DEAR MR. HORACE KIRKMAN,

"I am very sorry to hear that my withdrawal from the pleasure-party planned for Thursday week is likely to be a cause of annoyance to your father. You must, however, please to recollect that I did not promise unconditionally. I mentioned when the invitation was given that I might possibly be unable to avail myself of it when the time came. I said this to your father, and he did not, as it seemed to me, pay any attention to my warning, taking it for granted (as he is apt to do) that everything would naturally arrange itself according to his wishes. I do not, however, mean altogether to excuse myself, for I feel I have been very much to blame during the past three months, in allowing a great deal to

be taken for granted by you and your friends which, according to the terms of our agreement, was to be held in abeyance till further acquaintance made us better aware of our mutual wishes. I do not want to try your patience in any way whatever beyond reasonable limits, and I am quite ready, whenever you please, to tell you the result on myself of the three months' experience we have already had. But I warn you that if you ask for it now, it will not justify you in taking for granted, as you say you wish to do, that you and your friends have claims on me to which I am ready to defer all others. I am very far from having arrived at any such conclusion at present, and I am very sorry to hear that you expect it.—Yours sincerely,

"ALMA RIVERS.

"P.S.—Do not come here till after your day at Hurlingham—I shall not be able to see you."

The daylight had entered the room through the curtained windows, and was making the wax candles on the dressing-table burn with a sickly light when Alma sealed her letter, but it was still early enough for her to be able to move about the house without fear of encountering anybody. She felt a feverish desire to put the letter out of her power to recall or alter, before

any second thoughts came to modify her present mood; so, throwing a shawl round her, she crept softly downstairs and laid her note on the hall-table, where her father always placed over-night the letters he wished to have posted the first thing in the morning. The servants had been trained to punctuality and care in this matter, and when Alma at last laid her tired head down on her pillow and dropped asleep, it was with the thought of a step irrevocably taken, for she knew that her letter would be in the hands for whom she intended it, when her maid came a few hours hence with her morning cup of tea, to rouse her, as her father had said, to to-morrow's budget of worries.

Alma had not given a second thought to her father's remarks about the reported trouble in Saville Street. It did not even recur to her mind at once, when the portentous length of face her maid presented on drawing her curtains, warned her that some unusually tragic piece of news had to be imparted.

"What is it, Anne? You had better tell me at once," she said. "Which of my valuables have you broken or lost, or which of the household has gone away without giving warning? Nay, you don't mean that it is anything really serious? Where is my father?"

"Gone out, Miss Alma, two hours ago, but he left word that you were not to be disturbed till your usual hour after a ball. He went away with Dr. Urquhart, who called before Sir Francis had left his room. Here's a note for you, miss, that Sir Francis bade me take up to you with your breakfast."

Alma seized the twisted sheet of paper and read :

"My last night's fears have proved only too true. Urquhart has just brought sad news from Saville Street. Your poor Uncle West died suddenly yesterday afternoon, and your aunt is thoroughly knocked down by the shock. I am going now to see what can be done for them, and I think it most likely that I shall have to start this evening for La Roquette to fetch poor little Emmie home to her mother. Can you be ready to go with me? I have had some talk with Urquhart; he does not quite like the last report of your mother's health, and thinks she ought not to be hurried home or left alone even for a week at La Roquette, so you will be wanted to take Emmie's place immediately. See Constance, and make what arrangements for leaving the house you can; I will be back to talk them over with you as soon as possible."

"Is everybody as selfish as I, or am I actually a

monster of heartlessness?" Alma asked herself whenever during the hurry of engagements that filled every hour of the day, a pause for thought came, and she tried to understand the state of mind into which this calamity had thrown her. Why could she not be as sympathetically engrossed with the Wests' misfortunes as she saw her father was? Why did other thoughts rush in and make to-night's journey look so like a flight from all the trouble in the world, from all the shams and cares of the world, that she could not connect it as closely as she ought with the tragedy that was its real cause? Why could she not keep her heart from bounding with a wild sense of escape and freedom when she thought of her letter to Horace Kirkman, and remembered that it could not be answered or appealed against now, till she had had that glimpse into Paradise, the anticipation of which rose like a golden mist, and hid from her the grief she ought to be sharing? It must be terribly selfish to feel thus; but whenever she had time to look down into her heart she found the secret joy there, and it would not be suppressed or denied. To escape self-reproach she occupied every moment, thinking of a dozen things for other people's comfort that might have escaped her in a less energetic mood, even to the purchasing of mourning for herself and her mother, knowing well that the

outside show of sympathetic grief would be a first necessity to Lady Rivers, and would be the immediate form in which her feelings for her sister would display themselves.

Sir Francis spent a great part of the morning in Saville Street, and came back much impressed with the straits to which the West household had evidently been reduced, and with the good sense and courage displayed by Harry and Mildie in the melancholy circumstances that threw so much responsibility into their hands.

"Sensible young things, both of them," he remarked to Alma; "children that a father might, one would think, have been proud of, even if he had made a muddle of everything else he had put his hand to in life. I don't think I should have died of a broken heart, if I had had a son with as much pluck and character as Harry West to stand by me in my misfortunes. We must see more of the lad. I wish any one of your brothers were worth half as much. I begin to suspect I have been something of a fool myself, to spend three or four hundred a year a-piece on their education, to turn them out at last a set of useless coxcombs, who will never show me a grain of gratitude as long as I live, when perhaps a little wholesome neglect and hardship

might have made Harry Wests of them. There can be no *primâ facie* reason why poor old West's sons should be worth more than mine. Circumstances must be to blame for the difference somehow."

"But would you be quite satisfied to have Frank or Gerald made up over again exactly after the West pattern?" objected Alma. "You are seeing the Wests under a halo of pathos just now, but in every-day aspect I doubt your liking to be called old-chap, and slapped on the shoulder by a youth who interlards his conversation with as much slang as comes from Harry West in his normal state of spirits."

"Well, I don't know, I think I could put up with even that, to be assured of the amount of right feeling I have had good evidence of, in the West lad to-day. I could forgive a little over-familiarity, or—don't be shocked, Alma—a little want of polish, to know that I should be looked at and spoken about after I was dead, with the real love and tender reverence Harry West showed to-day, in speaking of and looking at the father whose folly and stupidity had impoverished him. Well, well, as I said before, there are compensations in all lots, and perhaps we get what we work for, fairly enough on the whole. Misfortune drew West and his lad together and made them friends, while I have been too busy all

my life to cultivate much acquaintance with my sons. They look upon me as a convenient sort of machine for making money for them to spend, and I really don't know that I have been anything else to them, except, to be sure, their father, so perhaps I have no right to complain after all."

Later on in the evening, when the bustle of the start from the railway station was over, and Sir Francis and Alma found themselves alone in a first-class carriage, Sir Francis recurred to the subject again. Under cover of the dim lamplight, he favoured Alma with a glimpse into the graver side of his mind, such as he had never shown any one since youthful aspirations and serious questions had been choked out (from expression at least) by what he would have characterised as the *real* business of life.

"Poor old West!" he began reflectively. "Harry took me up into the room where he was laid out, and I must tell you, Alma, it gave me a greater shock to see him lying there than I should have expected, considering how little we have been to each other of late. He looked much younger than when he was alive; the few hours' quiet had turned him into a fine, handsome, dignified-looking man, such as he used to be when I first knew him and was rather proud of his acquaintance. The

expression of his face was as peaceful as if he had not slipped away into the other world, leaving his work undone, and his wife and children burdens on other people's shoulders. I could not help wondering, as I stood by him, how it all looks to him now. *What* does he see, for I suppose he sees something, and that the aspect of affairs is a little different on the other side of the great gulf from what it is to us here. It's wonderful perhaps, that one goes on thinking so little about that last plunge, and taking so little trouble to find out whether one is exactly on the right tack, and whether, after all, one may not find that all one's toil and struggle and hurry have been given for the wrong things. If so, to have failed mayn't matter so much as one fancies, and poor West's life, as he looks back upon it now he is out of the battle, may not be more of an overthrow than a good many other lives that look better from this side. He has kept his wife's love at all events, and got a hold on his son's memory that won't wear out. Who knows but that those possessions may be counted more to his credit out there than all he lost, all we despised him, poor fellow, for losing."

"Papa, you should not talk as if there was no one to love and appreciate you," said Alma, putting out her hand in the darkness and laying it over his.

“Well, no, I don’t suppose I meant that; I am not complaining,” answered Sir Francis, sinking back into his shell, after the manner of his kind, when the danger of being drawn into talk on absolutely personal topics becomes imminent. “No, my dear. It was a shock, as I said, and sets one thinking, but it does not do to dwell on such subjects too long. Reflections of the kind seldom have any result in action; one plods on pretty much in the groove one has got into, at my time of life, whatever one says. And indeed, I shall have enough to think of apart from moralising, if I’m to have, as I plainly perceive I shall, another family on my hands as well as my own. I wonder whether old Kirkman could be wrought up to interest himself about those boys, and push them on in the world for me. You’ll have to see about that, Alma, when you get the reins into your hands there. I shall look to you and Horace as valuable coadjutors in my new cares, and luckily poor West’s sons are more likely subjects for Kirkman patronage than any of mine. Little Emmie won’t be much of a burden on anyone; and, by-the-way, was there not something about her in your mother’s last letter—a hint about a match for her, was it not—but never mind, my dear,” as the sudden withdrawal of Alma’s hand brought a suspicion that he had stumbled

upon a topic not likely to afford Alma pleasant meditations on her night journey. "Never mind, I have talked too long. You had better get a nap while you can, for I foresee a roughish passage, and I'll try if I can't spell out my *Times* by this vile lamp, for I have actually not unfolded it to-day."

Sir Francis stretched out his hands towards some newspapers which his servants had duly strapped up with the railway-rugs, and lighted upon a paragraph in which some circumstances affecting the fortunes and reputation of an old rival were commented upon. He was soon as intensely absorbed in his reading as if he had not stood, an hour or two before, half envying the peace of poor Mr. West's death-smile.

Alma drew herself as far as she could from him into a corner of the carriage, and turning her face away, thought bitterly of the inconsistencies of the conversation just ended. She had felt very near at heart to her father a few minutes ago; she had begun to long to tell him, that if he liked he might count on having one congenial relation—a son-in-law, if not a son, who had always appreciated him, and who could be reckoned on as a trustworthy companion and friend under any circumstances; then had come that allusion to the Kirkmans, and she had felt repulsed, driven back to the

loneliness into which she had shut herself lately. Her father, then, was reckoning just now after all these reflections, on his share of advantage from the Kirkman El Dorado, to which she held the key! She knew he would be kind and just to her, when she spoke to him about that letter to Horace Kirkman, which seemed to have been written years ago, instead of this morning; but she saw also that she should have to bear the weight of his disappointment, as well as that of her mother's despair, on which she thought more and more ruefully through every hour of the long journey.

CHAPTER XIV.

FEY.

Hopes, and fears which feed on hope,
An undistinguishable throng;
And gentle wishes long subdued,
Subdued and cherished long.

WYNARD had lent Emmie the second volume of Laing's "Sea Kings of Norway," and on the day when Sir Francis Rivers and Alma were speeding on their way to La Roquette, Emmie took the book out into the garden, and settled herself under the hedge of roses for a thorough enjoyment of it, while Lady Rivers slept through the hottest hours of the afternoon. She was busy with St. Olaf's history, which the owner of the book had recommended to her special attention. Whether owing to that fact or to the charms of old Snorro's style, she became so absorbed in following the early vicissitudes of the Saint's career, that she forgot all about her present surroundings. She let the sweet rose scents float past

her unheeded, and even left off listening for sounds of wheels approaching from the bottom of the hill, of which her ear had been expectant the whole afternoon. Just at the most thrilling part of the narrative, however, when she was reading the account of St. Olaf's night march to Sticklestadt, and had got to the point where, seeing the morning mist roll away and disclose his foes, the Saint burst out into song, and Finn Arneson, startled at the joyousness on the hero's face, interrupts him with the cry, "You are fey, king;" something seemed to call her back out of the story, into herself and the present moment again. She stooped down, gathered one of a cluster of open-eyed Stars of Bethlehem that had been meekly lifting their milk-white faces to her from among the grass at her feet, laid the spray upon the open page to mark the sentence at which she had paused, and closing the volume, rested her elbows on it and began to think. Years and years afterwards Emmie came unexpectedly upon the crushed white flower on that page again, and lifting it up, noticed with a strange thrill of emotion how the Norse hero's saying had been stained green by the juice of the Star of Bethlehem's thick stalk crushed upon it; and remembering the bright afternoon, and all that went before and came after, she had her interest in the end of St. Olaf's story quenched a second time,

though she had been reading it aloud to a pair of young auditors whose pleasure in Sagas was keener than her own had ever been. Her thoughts on this occasion soon disengaged themselves from St. Olaf. She wondered for a little while whether it was true that people were very happy just before a great trouble came upon them, and thought she had rather not know just now whether St. Olaf's triumphant outburst of song was a preface to defeat or victory. Perhaps he won the day at Sticklestadt and reigned peacefully over a united country for the rest of his life, after he saw the sun break so gloriously through that northern mist.

Emmie had no uncomfortable knowledge of history that forbade her pleasing herself with such a supposition, and then she glanced back through her own life to see if she could remember ever having been "fey" herself, and with what results. Before she had come to any conclusion, her ear was caught by a sound of voices approaching her from the path that wound along the hill-side. Madame, then, had left her carriage at the foot of the ascent, and was walking to the house by a circuitous path through the fields, for the sake no doubt of inspecting her vineyards, and ascertaining whether the farm-boys had done their last week's work of weeding properly.

Emmie did not think it necessary to move from her shelter just yet. Madame was apt to stand about a long time looking at her vines and holding forth on the best methods of treatment, and her present companion, Mr. Anstice, was only too ready to seize on the first pretext that came in his way to escape the details. It would not be well for her to give him such an excuse by showing herself too soon, and though the voices grew nearer and nearer and were quite audible at last, being indeed divided from her only by the rose hedge, there was nothing in the nature of the conversation to oblige her to make her presence known. It seemed to be altogether about business, and for the first sentence or two was hardly intelligible. Now they are walking up and down on the other side of the hedge, and their voices have a charm for Emmie, though it is still only of the property they are speaking. Madame has evidently been pointing out the extent of her territory to her companion; this field and that sunny vineyard on the top of the hill, the plot of flax down in the valley, the field sown with lucerne by the river, all that long southern slope of olive-trees beyond the pine-wood, sheltered from the wind and sunned all the year round by the mid-day sun.

"A good property," madame is saying, "though

insignificant according to English notions of an estate. Yet a good property."

Here she stands still and, as Emmie guesses, puts a hand on her companion's arm to arrest his attention, which no doubt had been wandering a little.

"Yes, a good property, and purchased, as I think I have told you once before, Wynyard, with money your uncle paid over to me on my father's death. I never quite believed that I was legally entitled to it, for I had always understood that my father had given me all he had it in his power to give on my marriage; but your uncle insisted, and I confess that at the time the comfort of having a considerable sum of money in my own hands to use as I liked (for the count, to do him justice, made no claim on this unexpected legacy) was so great, that I had not the heart to remonstrate very energetically. My cousin was rich enough to be generous to his old love; and I had a scheme for his happiness in my mind at that moment which would, I thought, overpay him for all I had cost him. When that hope failed utterly, I began to look on my little hill-side farm as a property which I held in trust, rather than owned to do as I liked with, and I made up my mind that it should never go to my son with the lands belonging to the château. I have done my best for him with

those, and it is owing to my good management that they are still unalienated and worth something. These few fields and my English farmhouse, as I call it, I have always intended to leave to whichever of my cousin's nephews came in for the smallest share of his wealth ; and I don't deny, Wynyard, that when the news of your disinheritance came, the shock was something softened to me by the thought that I had this shred of what once was his in my power, and that I could make up for his injustice to a small extent, by choosing you to be the one to come after me here. You won't despise your inheritance because it is such a mere handful in comparison to the one you lost ? ”

“ My dear cousin, how can you ask such a question of a landless man ? You are a great deal too good to me, and I wonder you don't perceive that I am already standing several inches higher in my shoes as the notion of becoming a landed proprietor one day, dawns upon me. But it will be a very distant day I hope, and we need not talk on the melancholy subject of inheritance this glorious afternoon, need we ? I assure you I can be deeply interested in the size of those wonderful clusters of vine-blossom you began by pointing out to me, without any greedy thought of owning the miracle of a vineyard that produces them by-and-by. Let us enjoy

ourselves in the sunshine ; why trouble our heads at all about the future just now ? ”

“ But it is not precisely of the future I am thinking at this moment, Wynyard. I have a reason for speaking on this matter to-day, probably the last occasion when we shall be quite alone together, before we start on the journey in the course of which you are to leave me. I am very lonely in my life here, and as I grow old I cling more and more to old associations and old friends ; and I have been thinking lately, that if you should marry soon and choose a girl of whom I could become fond—we will not commit ourselves to names, but you know my taste—some one, not of the great world, but well-bred and prettily mannered, who could make herself happy in simple ways with simple people ; then I should like you to look upon this place as actually your own from the date of your marriage : a provision that you might settle on your wife, and a home always ready for you to come and rest in, when your business gave you a little leisure. English girls are fastidious, I know, and averse to solitude, but I do not think it would be impossible to find one unspoiled enough to love this quiet place, and be content to spend a portion of her life near me here.”

“ Not impossible,” Wynyard answered, with a ring

of amusement in his voice, which told Emmie that he was smiling inwardly at his companion's diplomacy, but taking it in good part all the same. "Not impossible; but my dear Madame de Florimel, we won't discuss the pleasant possibility at this moment, grateful as I am to you for such generous purposes towards me. We might be led on to mentioning names, you know, if we talked any more, and that would be an impertinence, since I have nothing at present to tell you except that I have no intention of ever marrying a woman of the great world, and that I am quite as much awake to the merits of a love for La Roquette as you yourself are. We had better go back to the grape clusters, I think. There is a monstrously fine trailing shoot down here. Shall we go and examine into the promise of it?"

"Leaves, my dear Wynyard, leaves that want pruning: you will never be much of a gardener, I am afraid."

The steps moved on further down the hill, and Emmie, who for the last moment or two had been crouching with her head on her book in a horror of drawing attention to herself, and yet in an agony of embarrassment at what she was overhearing, sprang up and fled towards the house. Her limbs were trembling and her cheeks tingled when she reached the shelter of

her own room, and could begin to get herself ready to meet face to face the speakers of that talk she had begun to listen to so unsuspiciously, and now felt so guilty for having overheard. Names indeed! Oh, if her name had been spoken, Emmie thought she must have packed up her clothes and rushed straight back to her mother, without even looking again into Madame de Florimel's face, or meeting those other eyes, whose half-playful, half-tender expression while those sentences were being exchanged, she could picture to herself so well. Perhaps she ought not to repeat them even to her own heart, as they were not meant for her hearing. Yet after a moment or two, when Emmie's breath had come back, and she had cooled her cheeks with the flap of her garden hat, words and tones would return to her memory, making her heart beat quickly and her cheeks burn again. It was impossible not to be quite sure that both the speakers were thinking about her, and that hers was the name that was to be understood, and not spoken. "Poor Alma!" Emmie whispered to herself. "She was the 'woman of the great world,' who could not be happy at La Roquette, whom Wynyard had in his mind when his voice sharpened for a moment. She had shut the gates of that Paradise against herself. "I am quite as much awake to the merits of a love for La Roquette as

you can be." Emmie covered her face with the flap of her hat in a glow of shame at having overheard *that* in the tone of meaning in which it had been spoken, before such strange wonderful news was meant for her ears. But when she raised her head again, it was with a sense of dignity resting upon it, as if, while realising all that sentence implied, a garland of honour had noiselessly floated down, crowning her with approval so dear, ah! so dear, so beyond all expectation and hope, that it must be a defence against every other trouble or sorrow for the rest of her life.

The sound of Madame de Florimel's high-pitched voice asking for Lady Rivers at the open front door, woke her up to an immediate trouble however. She must make up her mind to come out of hiding at once, for it would never do to allow Aunt Rivers to be caught napping by Madame la Comtesse, more especially to-day, when the visit had been announced beforehand, and was made for the express purpose of consultation on arrangements for the journey to Clelles, which was now definitely fixed for the end of that week.

The château party, however, had had a second motive for their drive up the hill that afternoon. Wynyard began to explain this to Emmie as soon as the two elder ladies had comfortably dropped into a discussion on the

utmost possible amount of baggage that could be packed into a carriage.

The families of Madelon and Antoine had come to an understanding immediately after madame's *fête*, and now the marriage was to be hurried on, in order that Madame de Florimel and her guest might be present at the wedding. Antoine, with many apologies for his presumption, had come that morning to remind Wynyard of a half-promise made on the evening of the dance, that he and the young English lady who had so distinguished Madelon by her friendship, would accompany the bride and bridegroom when, according to village custom, they went the round of the neighbourhood together to dispense invitations to the wedding. Madelon had been to the farm that morning to beg the same favour of Emmie, and had engaged her to be at the Orange-tree House by five o'clock, but Emmie had not as yet ventured to request leave of absence from her aunt, fearing she would frown upon the plan.

While Emmie was hesitating, and deprecating Wynyard's interference with frightened, anxious glances towards Lady Rivers, such as always roused his indignation afresh against his old enemy, the matter was skilfully taken up by Madame de Florimel, who put refusal out of the question by insinuating that Emmie

would oblige her by paying this compliment to her favourite, and at the same time set her at liberty to spend an hour or two with Lady Rivers, "of whom I have seen too little, lately," she added diplomatically.

"Yes, yes, my child," madame went on, turning a beaming face of encouragement and approval on Emmie, "I know you will undertake this little duty for me while I take your place with your aunt. We shall find plenty to talk about, and she has given me leave to speak to her good Ward about the packing of her things for the mountain journey. All that cannot be done in a moment. Run away and get ready, that you may not keep our friends at the Orange-tree House waiting. The sun is hot still, but you will be in the valley during the first part of your walk, and you need not hurry home. I will take care of your aunt, and I shall not mind waiting till the cool of the evening for my drive back to the château."

Rather to Wynyard's surprise, for he had been in a very talkative mood till the walk began, a spell of silence fell upon him and his companion, when they had passed the rose hedge and had begun the descent of the hill, where Emmie insisted on choosing the most direct of the many paths between the vineyards, instead of taking the winding, shady road through the pine-wood. It was

not shyness exactly that kept Emmie silent, and led her to avoid the dim solitude of the bosquet; she was too happy to be shy, but a slight chill of fear had come over her at the sight of the rose hedge, a fear of feeling "fey," of letting in the flood of happiness too soon; and her enjoyment of her afternoon holiday was just dashed with a touch of awe and shy reserve. When Wynyard, every now and then in the steep descent, held out a hand to help her over a projecting stone, or one of the many little watercourses that divided the plots of ground on the hill-side from each other, he was struck with something new in her face; a fresh expression, dignified and yet soft, through which a lovely light of tremulous restrained joy played in a half smile now and again.

Perhaps every one has a culminating moment of beauty in their lives, when their best self looks forth and shows the ideal of perfection and glory hereafter to be reached. Emmie's moment of ideal beauty came that afternoon, when, for an hour or two, the bright, frank, hopefulness of youth, and the dawning tenderness of womanhood met and crowned her with their opposite charms,—for an hour or two—before the strength of the one quenched the other.

When they had reached the bottom of the hill, Wynyard had no excuse for turning round and looking in the face

whose strange sweetness had set him wondering. He roused himself therefore to begin a conversation, and when once the spell of silence was broken, they found plenty to say, one topic seemed as fruitful as another. Everything,—the bluets in the river, the green lizard, that started up under their feet and lost itself in the lucerne, the tall flowering asphodel, whose name Emmie had never heard before—all these subjects, as they presented themselves one after the other, proved to have a peculiar interest that afternoon, and would have served, as it seemed, to talk about for ever. It could not be that Emmie said anything very well worth listening to about them, or that Wynyard was unusually eloquent, except, perhaps, about the asphodel which naturally enough had poetical associations; but every sentence, every question and answer, still more the smiles that sometimes did for answers, brought the two speakers further and further out of themselves into a fuller consciousness of delight in each other's presence, and into an existence a little outside the everyday world in which, perhaps, for the time being, they were both "fey." There was a little bit of climbing again before they got to the Orange-tree House, and Emmie's hands were full of bluets and asphodel, so that she wanted more help along the broken path than usual. Wynyard, holding one of her little

hands the greater part of the way, wondered whether she would look in Saville Street as she did now, and if so, whether he had not been rather hasty in deciding that all strong emotion in life for him ended with the withering of his love for Alma. Could there be anything better, or sweeter in the world than a fresh May rose, and what expression of indignation would be strong enough for the churlish heart that should sullenly shut itself against its rare perfume?

The bridal pair in the Orange-tree House had been waiting some time for their principal supporters to join the procession, when Emmie and Wynyard appeared: and for the remainder of the afternoon these two found themselves taking part in a village pageant, which was pretty enough in itself to make it something to remember for all the rest of a prosaic town life, if there had been nothing else to stamp the scene upon the memory. To Emmie, the march of that bridal procession up hill, through valley and hamlet in the golden sunset and the softening grey gloom that gathered afterwards, was always a walk quite by itself, fenced off from everything else in her life, a passage through an enchanted land which dropped out of existence at the end of the evening, and could never be found again—never. It was not only the sunset glory lying on the hills, and the spicy perfume of the flower-

fields they passed between, that lifted Emmie so far out of her ordinary self, nor the little bursts of song in which the party indulged now and again as they climbed a steep to a group of wood-cutters' huts among the pines, or wound down to a solitary house from which, perhaps, a band of young people would troop out to meet them, returning their song, or shouting with joy and congratulation: it was not the general beauty and joyousness of that moment only she felt; there was a mingling in her memory of Eastern story and sacred parable, of descriptions dimly realised in her childhood—of brides carried with song to their homes, and virgins going forth to meet the bridegroom—which added the heightening touch of poetic elevation, an indefinite sense of awe and mystery to her mood.

The sun had quite set when they reached La Roquette, and the party made a halt on the open space before the church, to arrange their next proceedings. Antoine and Madelon, with their young friends, were invited to spend the evening at the house of an uncle of Antoine's who lived in the village, where the elders of their families were to join them, and a preliminary bridal feast to be held; but Emmie, when she was urgently pressed to be of the party, hesitated. The suggestion roused her to a recollection of the passing of time, and she looked rather

anxiously, first at the sky and then at Wynyard, and asked him how they were to get back to the maisonnette, before Madame de Florimel was quite tired of waiting for them. After some consultation, she and Wynyard agreed to take leave of their companions here, and cross the road to the château, where Joseph Marie might be persuaded to find a vehicle that would take them quickly up the hill; and as Madelon and Antoine had still to call at the priest's house, where the most important invitation of all had to be given, the adieux and thanks were less lengthy than might have been expected. The priest lived beyond the school-house, at the bottom of a little street that sloped to the edge of the river on the further side of the hill, and Emmie and Wynyard stood still under the church porch for a minute or two watching their friends, till the windings of the path hid them; then Wynyard looked at Emmie and smiled.

"How long is it," he asked, "since you and I talked over the first act of this little drama so nearly at its finish to-day? No, don't answer me. I don't want to count the weeks. It is a very short time for a love-story to have reached its climax in, but it is a long time for a holiday to have lasted, for every day of which we shall have to pay interest by-and-by. We won't even calculate how many days have passed since we stood here and

were secret witnesses to the promise that is to be fulfilled in a few days."

"I don't think it is long," said Emmie, "even for a holiday. It seems to me only a day or two."

"The seasons won't let us say quite that," answered Wynyard. "The year marches on, and thrusts the lapse of time in our faces, however hard one tries to forget it. Don't you remember how pink with bloom these quince trees were when we stood under them on madame's *fête* day, and now they have nothing to show but a few over-blown blossoms and crude green leaves that set one's teeth on edge. Stay, though, here is one out-of-time spray full of fresh flowers still on the shady side of this tree, pinker than a quince blossom has any right to be, as pink as a May rose," lifting up an overhanging bough as he spoke, and showing a little tuft of blossom hidden underneath.

"Might I gather it, I wonder?" said Emmie.

"It looks as if it belonged to you, but let me reach it. There!" stretching out his hand and plucking the cluster of blooms. Then, just as he was going to put it into her outstretched hand, he drew it back again, and said quickly, "By-the-way, do you happen to know what a bit of quince blossom used to mean long ago?"

"No," said Emmie, looking up into his face, and

seeing with surprise the sudden rush of colour and emotion that crossed it. "No, I don't know anything about quince blossoms, but I should like to have that little spray you have gathered for me."

"So you shall in a minute, when I have told you what I am thinking of. I just remembered having read somewhere that it was a custom in Greece for a man to send a ripe quince to a girl when he was courting her in marriage—a better way than asking her in words, was it not? And as ripe quinces cannot be had at every season of the year, and love is not always full-blown, I was wondering whether quince blossoms might not have a meaning of their own when they are gathered for a person. What do you say to this one, which I really think must have hidden itself and refused to blow at the right time that we might find it here to-night. Will you have it?"

"It—it is very pretty, and I should like to have it very much," said Emmie, holding out her hand.

As Wynyard put the spray between her fingers his lips said: "Thank you," in a most commonplace way; but his eyes spoke a deeper gratitude, while Emmie quickly turned hers away, too shy and at the same time too glad, to let them be looked into for more than a second, finding too that the pink spray in her hand was ~~the~~ ^{the} safest thing to contemplate just then. Its cool,

fresh, pink-and-white blossoms had almost as much rest and congratulation and promise in them as a mother's or a sister's face might have had if such a one had been near.

They turned and walked in the direction of the Place in silence, and Wynyard had time both to wonder at the imprudence of his speech made under the sudden impulse of a recollection, and to congratulate himself on the great throb of joy that the remembrance of having so spoken brought with it. There was no misunderstanding that; and if this was the *real thing*, why should he look back to question or blame the impulse that had led him beyond his present intention, and shown the true state of his heart?

As they drew near the château, where their *tête-à-tête* would be interrupted, he began to long for another full look into Emmie's eyes. In that startled moment of meeting his as he gave her the flower, they had revealed a depth of tenderness and shy joy such as he had never even imagined could shine upon him from Alma's.

To make her turn her face comfortably towards him, he began to speak on quite another topic.

"I want to consult you, before we part, about the best time and way to make our little offering to the bride. I have it ready, and I had intended to ask you to present it this evening, but as you will be sure to see Madelon

again before the wedding, you may as well take charge of it now, and give it when you two are alone. Madame de Florimel told me our present should be something that the bride could always wear, and as I had to send to Paris for it, I ordered a strong guard-ring; the sensible people here preferring, I understand, solid ornaments to finery. What do you think of it? It may perhaps be a little thick and clumsy, but it will have to take part in a good deal of rough work on Madelon's finger; and I want it to last till that time we talked about, when Antoine and Madelon are to tell their grandchildren in our hearing the story of the grocer's defeat on madame's *fête* day."

He made a mistake in saying *that* if he wanted Emmie to look at him, for the reference to their talk on madame's birthday brought another rush of colour; and, instead of looking up, she busied herself in unfolding the paper-parcel Wynyard handed to her, and in examining the ring—a solid hoop of gold joined in the middle by two hands clasping each other, each with a circlet of rubies at the wrist.

"But won't you give it to her yourself?" said Emmie, when she had turned it round and praised it. "I had thought of a little present too. This cairngorm brooch which I pinned into my neckerchief to-day, meaning to take it out and give it to Madelon if a good opportunity offered. Old Mrs. Urquhart gave it me

when I left home, but I don't think she would mind my parting with it, if I told her all the circumstances. You think it very ugly, I'm afraid ; hardly worth giving."

"No, indeed ; I was only thinking I did not believe it had ever pinned a bunch of Stars of Bethlehem into a neckerchief so daintily before. It's a splendid brooch—for old Mrs. Urquhart or for Madelon. Do as you think best about giving it, but I hope you will present the ring as well. I particularly wish *that* to be a joint offering from the conspirators who circumvented the grocer. It will be worth nothing unless it passes through your hands."

Emmie promised that Madelon should have the ring before the wedding-day, and by the time that matter was settled they were at the gates of the château, and Wynyard left Emmie to rest under the magnolias, while he found Joseph Marie and persuaded him to let them have a conveyance of some kind to take them up the hill.

Emmie found a seat under one of the trees overlooking the Place, and was not sorry to be alone for a little while. The perfect day had faded now into a lovely, still, windless evening, and the Place and the village street were very quiet and empty, more so than usual. The busy people were still at work in the fields, and the women and school-children who, at another hour, would have been knitting at their doors, or playing

under the chestnuts, were just now assembled in the church, singing the hymns to Mary, which wound up the business of the day at La Roquette. Only a stray figure crossed the plane of her vision now and then. A girl coming from one of the flower-fields with a basket of roses on her head, a boy driving a flock of sheep towards the mountain from their pasture by the river, where they had been feeding all day, a mulet laden with refuse from the vineyards crossing the bridge and making all the little bells on its neck tinkle musically at every step. At the time Emmie hardly knew that these sights, which had now lost all strangeness for her, made any impression on her senses; she scarcely noticed them, but afterwards she recalled each one vividly and jealously, painting them in a glory borrowed from her own thoughts as she sat waiting for Wynyard's return. A rapturous calm, born of certainty, of content, following upon the startled joy of the preceding moment, possessed her during that little space of time, and caused the objects associated with it to remain for ever in her memory like scenes from another world. The bridge was empty for a minute after the disappearance of the mulet, but now the people begin to flock out of church towards it; children shouting and running, old women hobbling on crutches, M. le Curé, in shovel hat and cassock, slowly emerges from the porch and takes the road to the bridge, instead

of turning towards his own house. Madelon will wait a little while longer, Emmie thinks, if he is disposed for a walk in the Place before he goes home; and then her attention is distracted from M. le Curé. A vehicle, not a *charette*, but a covered travelling carriage, appears at the turn of the road close to the bridge, and the children, nay, the grown-up people, M. le Curé himself, draw up in a little crowd on the side path to get a good look at it and into it as it crosses the bridge. Travelling carriages bearing tourists to the mountains are common enough in the summer, but it is hardly the season for them yet, and the four horses attached to this one have an air about them as if they had been driven a considerable distance in great haste. Emmie half smiles at herself for being infected by the general curiosity, and for thinking that she too will take a hasty glance into the travelling carriage as it passes the Place. Perhaps there is a bridal pair inside, as happy as that expectant one who are now peeping out from the Curé's door to watch for his return.

The speed of the carriage slackens now that it has passed the bridge, the driver appears to be pulling up to ask his way. What a lucky chance for all the people. M. le Curé steps forward to give the information required, and a head is thrust out from the carriage-window to question him further. For a moment Emmie's eyes

refuse to convey an intelligible impression to her brain. It must be an illusion ; but now another of her stunned senses is assailed, and she hears Uncle Rivers's voice asking in English-French the way to the farmhouse on the hill, where two English ladies are living ; and another face, Alma's face, pale and grave, appears behind his, putting the same question in more intelligible language.

At the first moment, as Emmie remembered with keen remorse afterwards, she did not think about home ; no fear even for her mother assailed her. Her heart died down into a lump of lead in her bosom, but it was at the sight of Alma's face. That beautiful, proud face before which she herself seemed to fade into nothing, in presence of which, as it appeared just then to Emmie, her own poor little evanescent dream of joy must shrivel up and wither quite away. What would it cost Alma to take it all up and with a word or a look crush out its life ?

After all, it was but for an instant. Emmie heard her own name called from the carriage before she had really had time for more than one thought about herself, and as she sprang up and hurried towards her uncle, something in his face awoke a fear that swallowed up all other thoughts. Uncle Rivers would not look at her like that unless he had some very bad news from Saville Street to tell her. Sir Francis sprang from the carriage and took her in his arms when they met.

"Mamma, is it mamma?—Oh, not mamma!" she whispered into his kind sympathising face.

"No, not that, not that, my poor, dear child," he said, trying to make his voice as reassuring as he could. "But how fortunate that we should meet you here; we were hoping to get hold of you first to have a little quiet talk without alarming your aunt suddenly. Get into the carriage, my dear. No, I am speaking the truth; your mother is in no danger, but—there has been illness. She wants you, and I have come to fetch you. You shall hear all as soon as you are in the carriage, my dear."

Alma had descended into the road after her father, and when Emmie lifted her head from her uncle's shoulder, where it had sunk for a moment, she saw that Wynyard had come out of the château, and was standing still in amazement, looking at the group by the carriage,—no,—it was on Alma's tall figure that his eyes were fixed, and his face wore a startled almost dismayed expression, that Emmie noticed even then. He came up to the carriage before it started, and spoke to Sir Francis; but Emmie threw herself far back on the seat, and covered her face and her ears with her hands, dreading to hear the answer to his question, refusing to herself to look at him while he heard, for fear of knowing too soon. When the carriage had gone a little way down the road, however, a sudden fear of never seeing the place again seized her.

If her mother wanted her she must start on her return journey at once, that night, and she should most likely never see La Roquette again in the daylight as long as she lived. Rather to her uncle's and Alma's surprise, she jumped up and looked out of the carriage-window, craning her neck to get an extended view. Wynyard was still standing at the château gate, and he waved his hand, surprised also to get another glimpse of her little white face; but it was not his figure, his last look after her, that Emmie saw and tried to fix in her memory. Alma, from her side of the carriage, might be looking too. It was the twilight scene she was moving away from that she gazed at, till the carriage reached the curve of the hill. The grey château, the dark green magnolia trees; the village street, where the children stood in groups staring after the carriage; the winding river with its tall canes, and old stone bridge; and the red church tower among the quinces and olives, crowning the eminence beyond—"The place where I have been happy"—Emmie said to herself, with a great foreboding cry of her heart, as it lessened and lessened in the distance.

"And now, uncle," she whispered, sinking back into her seat, when they had passed the curve of the hill—"Tell me why it is that mamma wants me, I should like to know at once."

CHAPTER XV.

THE SERPENT IN THE GARDEN.

And it bears the fruit of Deceit,
Ruddy and sweet to eat;
And the raven his nest has made
In its thickest shade.

SIR FRANCIS RIVERS stayed one night at the maisonnette, and started on his return journey with Emmie early on the following morning. They were to take the train at the nearest station, and by travelling day and night hoped to reach London on the morning fixed for Mr. West's funeral.

"Poor little Emmie!" Sir Francis said to Alma, who had come down early to give him breakfast before he started. "It will be a dismal change for her. She seems to have been making herself very happy here, and very useful to your mother, and I don't like dragging her away to such a miserable state of things as she will find in Saville Street; but her arrival just before the funeral will be a comfort to her poor mother. Urquhart

urged it; and after all she must, poor child, face the desolation some time. She is bearing it well, you say, and seems tolerably composed and reasonable this morning—no tears or hysterics, eh?” Sir Francis asked, with a puzzled anxiety, not feeling, in spite of his compassion for Emmie, the courage to take a very tearful companion on such a long journey, or knowing exactly how to set about the task of comforting poor West’s daughter, if she should say things in praise of her father that he could not by any means agree to.

“You need not be afraid, papa,” said Alma; “Emmie is very quiet, and says little even to me. I don’t think you will find her difficult to manage on the journey; perhaps I had better go now, and see that mamma does not detain her with a long good-bye. I have all your directions, have I not? You decided that the journey to Clelles, as arranged by Madame de Florimel, might as well be carried out by mamma and me?”

“Yes, if you think it best to take your mother away from this house so soon.”

“I am sure of it—mamma will never like the place again after hearing such news here; there is nothing for her but change of scene when she is in low spirits.”

“Yes, and I am glad that you will have companions to help in rousing your mother—otherwise I should be

almost as sorry for you, my dear, as I am for Emmie. Your mother is—it is better to say it out—apt to be a little unreasonable when she is unhappy, and she seems bent this morning on taking poor West's death as an argument for proving her own state of health to be worse than was supposed. Nothing I urge to the contrary seems to make the slightest impression. However, you know how to bear with her, Alma, and are perhaps less likely to be tempted to argue the point than I am; though, to be sure, I ought to have learned the uselessness of reasoning with her, by this time of our lives. The change, and Madame de Florimel's society, will at all events divert your mother's thoughts for a while, and if she does not recover her spirits in a week or two, or Clelles does not suit her, I must make a push to come out to you, when affairs in Saville Street have shaped themselves a little, and I can get away from my work again. Meanwhile you must write often to me, Alma—ah! there is the crack of the driver's whip; the carriage is coming up to the door. You had better go and bring poor little Emmie down, I think—there is no time to lose.”

Alma found Emmie fully equipped, and her packages neatly strapped ready for the journey. Tearless, too, with nothing about her that need have made the greatest

dreader of emotion object to her company; yet with a quiet despair in her eyes, which struck Alma as altogether too sad even under the circumstances, for she could not bring herself to see Mr. West in the light of a very irreparable loss, let him be ever so much one's father.

Emmie was standing by the dressing-table when Alma entered, taking some flowers from a vase, and laying them together with very trembling fingers.

"Let me help you," Alma said. "You can hardly hold them; but do you think it worth while to take flowers on such a long journey? They will be dead long before you get to London."

"Yes, I know," said Emmie, in the same quiet, dull voice in which she had answered all Alma's remarks since she came. "I know they will die directly, but——" She did not finish her sentence, but she did not yield the half-faded branch of quince blossom she held, to Alma's hand, stretched out to take it away; her fingers seemed to cling to it, and, in spite of their trembling, she finished making up her bouquet without letting her cousin touch the flowers. Alma was satisfied that she would not be a very helpless travelling companion for her father, in spite of that look of overpowering pain in her eyes. She had more self-


command and strength of will than one would give her credit for, to look at her.

Lady Rivers was of course vociferous in her lamentations when Emmie went to wish her good-bye, and Sir Francis had to come upstairs at the last possible minute and carry her off, leaving Alma to soothe her mother as best she might.

Except a distant glimpse of the carriage as it wound down the hill, Alma saw no more of the travellers, but she heard many stray scraps of news of them during the long tedious days that followed. Whenever she came across any of the people belonging to the farm, they stopped her to impart some piece of intelligence that had travelled up the hill, and was being circulated through the neighbourhood by some lucky person who had caught a passing glimpse of Emmie's face, or figure, as the carriage drove through the village. The farther away from La Roquette that the glimpse had been obtained, the more valuable it was held to be, and the greater interest was attached to a full account of it. As the days passed, and the interest did not diminish, Alma felt bewildered, not knowing how to reconcile this universal occupation of a whole neighbourhood about Emmie West with the family opinion of her insignificance.

"That poor sweet mademoiselle," La Fermière began,

seating herself by Alma's side in the porch on the last evening before her departure, and talking as familiarly to her as if she had been Emmie—"That dear Mademoiselle Emmé, the whole neighbourhood is desolated at her having been carried away from us so suddenly, and for so sad a cause. The other night at the dance at Père Barbou's, some one brought in the sad news among the wedding-guests, and it was one exclamation of regret, one cry of sorrow. Madelon, the bride of to-morrow, wept; oh! how she wept, in spite of the bad omen of tears at a betrothal feast; and her lover could not chide her, for he was almost as bad himself. It was terrible, and then Madame la Comtesse and her English relation who were to have assisted at the wedding to-morrow, with Mademoiselle Emmé, only imagine what their feelings must be to-day! Very little sleep they had we may be sure on that sad night when the news came, hardly more than the dear Mademoiselle Emmé herself, who looked so white, so white on the morning she left us, and who yet stopped to kiss little Jean Baptiste at the last moment, when she was getting into the carriage. After that, as far as one hears, she took no notice of anyone. *Le gros* Jean who was working by the roadside five miles from La Roquette that morning, affirms, indeed, that the carriage passed him closely, and that Made-



moiselle Emmé made him a sign of farewell from the window ; but still it is well known that while she was in the village she never looked out—no, not even when the carriage passed the château, though madame herself was standing out at the gate, longing—so Joseph Marie tells us—for a look, or a word. Well, well, the world goes round ; and it is now a funeral, and now a wedding that one is hurried to. But that dear demoiselle—to have seen her and the relation of madame, as they passed through that little gate in the rose hedge, on their way to the valley three days ago. Hold, mademoiselle, I was watching them from the window of my dairy down there, and certainly it was not of death and misfortune one was reminded in looking at them. The one as beautiful as the other—as I ventured to tell madame not twelve hours after, who laughed like this ; but, bah ! mademoiselle wishes to be alone”—and La Fermière at last gathered up her knitting, and walked off to her own end of the house. Alma quite understood the unfavourable comparisons between herself and Mamselle Emmie that the good woman made as she went.

Still, with all these distractions, how long the days of preparation were to Alma ! Her heart was heavy and anxious, and yet she could not help feeling irritated instead of sympathetic with her mother's constant

wailings, which always seemed poured out over the least legitimate causes of complaint. She racked her brains for consolatory remarks, and found all her efforts useless, since nothing but a direct assurance that she would marry Horace Kirkman without delay, and undertake that his father should make the fortunes of all the West orphans—would satisfy her mother's requirements, or give her the only comfort she would accept. Under the guise of complaint and condolence, a wearying contest of wills went on all day long, and Alma had no time to give to anticipations of the mountain journey and the companionship it would bring her into, till late on the last evening, when Lady Rivers had fallen asleep, and she sat for more than an hour at the window in Emmie's little bedroom, listening to the song of a nightingale that, from the rose hedge, was filling the garden with melody.

Her spirits rose under this soothing influence, and she found her thoughts straying far away from the Wests' troubles, and complacency with her present situation creeping in. Three days out of her old life given back to her—that she thought was going to happen—three days out of her youth, before ambition and worldly councils had spoiled her; three days of complete forgetfulness of the Kirkmans; three days of such interchange of thought and sympathy as, she believed for her, could

only be had with one person, and must never be tasted again. That, at all events, she might hope for, to say nothing of possibilities arising from these, which, in the hush of the soft night, looked quite near and easy of attainment.

The first day's journey was to be a short one, and the start was not to take place till after twelve o'clock, as Madame de Florimel had an engagement in the morning, and Lady Rivers wished to await the arrival of the post which might bring news of the travellers. This would be the last opportunity of receiving letters for some days; and Alma, having heard of the uncertainty of the *facteur's* movements, came out into the porch once or twice during the early morning to watch for his approach as Emmie had so often done.

She was in much better spirits this morning, and more sociably inclined towards the inmates of the farm when they came up to her, for things were altogether looking brighter. Lady Rivers had slept well, and was equal to taking an interest in the packing, and in the prospect of the mountain drive; and besides, Joseph Marie had been to the maisonnette with a message from madame, long before the English inhabitants of the best rooms were awake; and Alma felt sure that if there had been a departure from the château yesterday, Madame Dallon

would have told her of it the first thing, when she came up into the porch, to point out the road down which the *facteur* might soon be seen approaching, and which they were to follow for the first stage of their journey.

“A hot drive they would have in the middle of the day, to-day,” Madame Dallon waited to remark. “But what would you have? madame could not disappoint the good Claires of her presence at their daughter’s wedding this morning. Yes, the wedding that is going on precisely at this moment in the church down there. If mademoiselle had been up a little earlier and had chosen to climb the brow of the hill and stand under that clump of fig-trees, she might have seen madame, and monsieur her English relation, and M. le Curé crossing the Place on their way to church. Alas, that Mademoiselle Emmé should not be one of that party! Stay—this piece of orange-blossom; mademoiselle sees how fine it is—it is from a tree that Jean Baptiste calls his own, and he had flattered himself, the poor child, to present a bouquet to his dear Mademoiselle Emmé this morning; and now for want of better he has stuck it here in his mother’s cap. Hark! the bell—that is the signal that mass is half over, and in another ten minutes or so the procession will be leaving the church. Will mademoiselle come to the fig-trees, or will she wait here

and take in the letters should the *facteur* pass within the next quarter of an hour?"

Alma smilingly declined the scramble up hill, and her companion, overjoyed to be set at liberty, ran off, shaking the spray of orange-blossom from her head on to the path as she ran. Alma took the trouble of going to pick it up, and then stood still for a minute or two, turning her head to catch the faint tinkling of bells far below in the valley which the soft wind brought at intervals to her ear. A swift little joy note, now clear, now faint, now dying away, and again sounding a *reveillé* to gladness and hope. But for that, the house and garden were intensely still, for Lady Rivers and her maid were busy in the upper story, and all the other inhabitants had betaken themselves to the point of observation under the fig-trees.

As Alma mounted the steps again, it flashed into her mind that this was the day when she was to have gone to Hurlingham with the Kirkmans, and the party of great people whom poor Mrs. Kirkman would be puzzled to entertain without her help. Horace would have been coming to fetch her soon, and she would have been at her toilette just now hard at work, really interested and anxious to shine forth among the guests, and make the doubtful entertainment a splendid success by the sheer

force of her social gifts and fascinations. A splendid dress, a present from old Mr. Kirkman for the occasion, which Alma blushed to think she had accepted willingly, was hanging up useless in her wardrobe at this moment. Would there ever come another suitable occasion for her to wear it, or was she really, *really* going, during this journey, to bid good-bye to that part of her life—to the side of her character that loved it—for ever?

She crossed her arms on the balcony at the top of the steps, and fixed her eyes on the point of the road where she expected the postman to appear, but her thoughts were soon too busy for observation. She wondered over the strange interweaving of lots—joy to one, grief to another—that go to make the crises of life. What a great many people's loss and trouble had it not taken to buy this chance of a new decision for her, and the tranquil, bright days during which it would be possible for her to make it. Poor little Emmie West, was she thinking of the contrast, too? The very flower in Alma's bosom whose strong fragrance forced itself on her notice through her reverie, was Emmie's by right. It had budded for Emmie, and now it was breathing its full-blown perfume into her face. Yes, it was strange how things were ordered. Alma's thoughts wound round and round this question, touch

ing it and straying a little beyond her own personal concerns, to grapple with the problem why benefit to one should, as it seemed, be bought by loss to another; but she did not, as Emmie might have done, turn her perplexity into a prayer. Serious thought with her was more prone to exhale itself in half-discontented speculation than to turn into prayers, though at that moment, as she remembered afterwards, there was a whisper in her conscience urging her to send up one cry for light and guidance in what she felt was likely to be a turning-point of her life,—one prayer that she might not be allowed to make a cruel use of other people's sorrow, and put her foot upon another's life, to reach what she wanted for herself. It was a little whisper, not so distinct to her mental ear as the tinkling of the joy-bell in the valley, and it sank into silence soon, when it was not heeded.

She was roused from her absorption by a voice addressing her, and turning round, she saw that the postman (who must have passed down the road unseen by her) was mounting the steps with a packet of letters in his hand. He would not let her take them till he had delivered himself of a long explanation of his reasons for leaving the letters for the château with her, as well as those addressed to the maisonnette.

"Was not madame coming up the hill in half an hour?" he asked, smiling, and pointing to a spray of orange-blossom in his button-hole. "Yes, he too was a wedding-guest, though unluckily too late for the ceremony. If the young lady would only relieve him of the last contents of his bag—this great bundle of letters for the château—he should be at liberty to return through the bosquet and join in welcoming the bridal party at the Orange-tree House on their return from church."

Alma took the letters with only a nod of acquiescence, and returned to the house, examining them as she went. There was nothing from Paris, but there was a thick envelope from Constance; and Alma, in dread of hints that might make her mother uneasy respecting Conny's home-life, turned into a little side room opening upon the hall, to read her sister's letter through, where she could be sure of being alone and uninterrupted. It was a kind of store-room, where Madame Dallon kept her billets of wood and the flax for her spindle, and it had no other furniture than an old chest with deep drawers, filled with wine corks which the boys had cut down during the winter evenings.

Alma put the château letters on the top of this chest, and stood near it while she read Constance's.

The first sheet was just what she expected—home-

news, interspersed with little hints about Sir John's habits, which made her thankful that she had taken the precaution of looking it through before giving it to her mother; but the second page began differently, and Alma was soon reading with startled eyes, and breath that came and went quickly:

"Dearest,—Lawrence has just been here. You won't scold me when you hear the news he came to tell. I can't help calling it joyful news, though it is shocking, too, and makes me feel as if everyone was going to die. Poor Uncle West!—and now a very different life cut short quite as suddenly. You remember, don't you, that Lawrence is related to the Anstices? Have you guessed it, Alma? Yes, it is that, the thing you once scolded me for wishing might happen some day. Poor young Lord Anstice is dead. He was drowned two nights ago, while crossing from Strome in a storm. His mother had been taken ill at a little fishing-lodge belonging to him in Skye, where she had gone at this unfit time of year, to spite him, Lawrence thinks, after a quarrel, which she said drove her from Leigh; and in hurrying to her, poor fellow, he met his death. She was always an odious woman, although I don't know why I say this, except to keep myself and you from being too sorry for her; there is so much to make us glad. Alma dearest, Wynyard—

our Wynyard, *your* Wynyard is Lord Anstice now, and possessor of all that great fortune; and whatever difficulties the Kirkman entanglement puts in the way (yes, I shall call it an entanglement now,)—you and he must, you shall, come together again. I will move heaven and earth for it if you won't! You will be shocked just at first; but, oh! I wish I was near you to pull your hands down from your face, and kiss the colour back into your cheeks, and force you to see it as I see it. I will never forgive you, Alma, if you let this great good fortune and happiness slip away from you, by any foolish scruples or false delicacy. Listen to me,—listen to me, we must one of us be happy—and I am not happy. I have never whispered it before, but I tell you, speaking from my heart now, that you may be as anxious as you ought to be, to escape marrying as I did. Oh, Alma, every day as I dress and undress, as I look round my house, and get into my carriage, I say to myself—it was not worth while—even what I have got does not seem to be mine, for my life is a sort of phantom to me, there is no reality in it, and I have no power to hold firmly even the outward prosperity people call mine. The days go by in a whirr and a dream, and when I venture to think a little, I can only say to myself, over and over again, that I am not happy, and that

I dare not look forward, and that if a wish were to shape itself in my mind now, it would be such a wicked one, that I shudder to think I am in danger of entertaining it. And mamma said I was to be so *safe*, lifted up above all the dangers and cares of life. But you, Alma, oh! you will have just everything,—the praise and envy of all your friends, and a high place in the world, and the man you love besides. It is lucky that you never actually wrote a refusal to Wynyard, or allowed it to be said publicly that you were engaged to Horace Kirkman. You were waiting, that was all. And surely it won't be difficult, now you have Wynyard all to yourself, to make him forgive that little delay. My secret hope, and reason for writing at once is that you may perhaps get this news a few hours before it reaches him. I should like him to see you, to have a few words with you, to get a little hint of your feelings, before he hears of this change of circumstances, it would make it all so much easier for you. You always called me a schemer, but is there any harm in scheming to bring about this perfect thing which would please everybody, and make two people, who have loved each other so long, happy at last? It would be too miserable if you let pique or misunderstanding come between you, now that all real obstacles are removed. Wynyard is just a little

crotchety we all know—but I trust to you, Alma, not to let this great joy slip from you, for want of acting.”

The last sentence was written on a half-sheet of paper, and Alma, when she had read it, let it slip through her trembling fingers and saw it float downwards, blown by a puff of wind into the depth of one of the drawers of the chest which stood half open. Her eye followed it mechanically till it rested on a surface of cork, but she did not stoop to recover it; she half wished she could get rid of the whole letter so, and of the tumult of anxiety, dismay, and yearning it had awakened in her mind. How could she compose herself to meet Wynyard a few moments hence, possessed of this knowledge? Nay, how could she herself give him the very letters that would convey it to him? *The* news that would once have concerned her so nearly—and that seemed such a mockery now when it would be, as she felt it would, in spite of all Constance’s suggestions, a barrier instead of a furtherance to her wishes. Her eyes fell on the packet of letters reposing on the top of the press. It was there certainly, in one of those long envelopes. It was too important news, he was too important a personage now, for someone not to have thought of summoning him back to England at once to take possession. How could Constance call it good news

for her? It was the overthrow of the hopes she had been indulging since she came here. It made them possible and impossible at the same moment, for now she could never make Wynyard believe that she had been on the point of yielding before the change came which made her yielding no longer a proof of disinterested love.

How could she, without incurring his contempt, give him now that little hint about her present relations with Horace Kirkman, which she had thought might perhaps come into one or other of the talks they would have during the three days' travelling together? Half an hour ago this had seemed so easy, and now——oh, why had Constance written?

Alma crushed the letter, and went out into the porch again, and stood looking over the garden towards the road, along which the farm people were now returning to the house. She tried to think about them, about the marriage just over; about Madame de Florimel, whom she had only just seen; of anything and everything she could bring before her mental vision, to crowd out a suggestion that had darted into her mind when her eyes fell on Wynyard's letters, and was threatening to seize upon her imagination with the grip of a strong temptation. Was it that her will to repel it was weak, or that she did not fight the evil thing with the only efficacious weapons,

for even while she believed she was thinking of other things, the temptation crept back, entering into her thoughts by unexpected avenues, till, as the time for action shortened, she found herself parleying with it and bringing the subtlety of her reason to strip it of its obvious ugliness, and give it new shape and colour. "Let me imagine for a moment" (this was the road by which the temptation crept back) "let me just imagine what would certainly have happened if the postman had been late this morning, as Madame Dallon says he so often is. If he had gone straight to the wedding-feast and neglected to deliver the letters here, till after we had started on our journey, they could not have overtaken us till we had reached Clelles. What a moment it would have been for us—I will say, us this once in my thoughts—when he had opened those letters and came to me with them in his hand. We should have renewed all our old intimacy on the journey, and he would know by that time I had broken off with the Kirkmans because I found I could not give him up in my heart. He would be full of grief for his cousin at first, and I should comfort him—I, who know how so well; and when the time for personal thoughts arrived, the keenest pleasure would come with the recollection that I had yielded in ignorance of what was coming. How he would con-

gratulate himself, and thank me for having given him such a proof of disinterested love. He would tell me, I know, that it was more than all his new honours and fortune and made them worth having. It would be a perfect reconciliation, a full restoration for me to all I lost in his esteem. Then what a triumph I should feel in telling mamma, how smooth and pleasant all the way would be, nothing to give up, nothing but roses, congratulations, joy, for everybody. For what a different thing it would be asking favours from Wynyard for the Wests, or for my brothers, from worming help out of old Mr. Kirkman, who can hurt one equally in giving or refusing. But I should never have to *ask* Wynyard, only perhaps to put out my hand to restrain the too generous, eager giving; nay, that would not be necessary now, he will be able to do all he wishes. What a position he will take at once, how popular, how sought after, how really great he will be, with his talents and eloquence and winning ways and enthusiasm, which will be no hindrance now, only another power. Papa would be proud of him; it would be a real bit of good luck and satisfaction coming into his life through one of his children at last. Oh, I cannot, I must not give up all this happiness. We must be reconciled before Wynyard hears the news. It must be Wynyard Anstice in his old

circumstances to whom I tell the story of my break with Horace Kirkman. There would always be a little doubt—a little cloud between us if we came together afterwards. And, besides, we never should come together. Wynyard is not the man to marry a woman about whom he has a little doubt, who had fallen from the pedestal even a little; it is all or nothing with him. And I should not be really deceiving him, I should be making him happy in the only possible way that is left; for—don't I know well in my secret heart that I have always preferred him. Patience—time—was it my conscience whispered that? But no! it must be done now; time would bring no help to me; we should drift further and further apart, and oh, I cannot bear to lose him now that I have let myself hope again. That must be the little gate that woman said she saw him pass through yesterday with Emmie West. Emmie West—I would not even let myself think of such a possibility a day or two ago, but perhaps I had better look at it for a moment now. Emmie and Wynyard—and I alone! Emmie, Lady Anstice! It would be a mistake, an absurdity. He cannot love her, for he loved, he loves *me*, and she is a child who thinks of nothing but Saville Street troubles and her mother; but he might take a romantic idea now of lifting her up because she has been always lowly, and perhaps, who

knows, poor child, has shown an interest in him in his poverty? If he goes on thinking of me as Horace Kirkman's promised wife a little while longer, that is what will happen."

Madame Dallon is within a few paces of the garden-gate now; in another minute or so she will catch sight of Alma's figure in the doorway and begin to talk to her, and Alma's life will be fixed.

"By such a little accident as that, shall it be fixed?" she asks herself. "Could one bear, through a lonely disappointed life, baulked every way, to remember always that one's destiny hung in the balance once, and that one let a little event like that decide one's action? No, one could not bear it. Remorse, if it came in weak moments afterwards, would be easier to put aside than a haunting, tantalising recollection like that!"

Madame Dallon did call out to Alma with her hand on the gate. She called to announce that madame had got into her carriage at the church door, instead of returning to the château, and that the four horses harnessed for the mountain journey were making such speed up the hill that she might be expected at the Farm in a quarter of an hour. Her shrill voice carried the words beyond the vestibule into the little room where Alma was standing, by the time her sentence ended, and

they steadied her hand from trembling too much to accomplish the object she was set upon—the sorting the château letters into two heaps, one for Madame de Florimel and one for W. Anstice, and the letting those last drop from her fingers into the drawer of the old cork chest. It had evidently been left half-open for weeks, perhaps since the winter evening when the boys had thrown in their last batch of cut corks, for there was quite a thick ridge of dust on the rim ; but Alma closed it with one resolute push, and still had time to come out of the room with Madame de Florimel's letters in her hand and put them down on the balustrade of the stone steps before anyone entered the house.

Everyone allows an acted lie to be morally as reprehensible as a spoken one, but at the same time most people find it easier to act than to speak a falsehood, and Alma felt a sort of gratitude to fate when she perceived Madame Dallon was standing with her back to the porch, chatting with a neighbour as she came out, and that she could thus escape having to tell her in so many words that the letters she laid down were what the postman had brought to the door that morning.

A quarter of an hour later Madame de Florimel appeared in the carriage, but no Wynyard. He had chosen to ride instead of accepting the fourth place in

the carriage, and was gone on before. Madame de Florimel explained rather pointedly to Alma that this was a new arrangement, and was due to her cousin's reluctance to intrude on Lady Rivers under present circumstances.

"He would not withdraw altogether from the expedition on my account," she said, "as I depend on his escort, and should not have undertaken the journey without him; but it has lost, as you can easily imagine, all special interest and attraction for him since we heard of the sad departure yesterday morning." She smiled significantly as she concluded, but no one responded.

They had just driven through the garden-gate and were turning their backs on the rose hedge and the many-windowed maisonnette, with its olive trees and strip of vineyard and sheltering wood behind, but it was not on that account that madame's remark received no answer. No one stood up to take a last look, though the farm people were assembled about the gate, and did not fail to remark to each other how different it would have been if Mademoiselle Emmé had been there. Lady Rivers was adjusting her wraps and her veil, Ward was fussing to find the best place for her mistress's dressing-case, and Alma held her head down and steadily avoided looking back. It was a greater effort than she had expected. What was the maisonnette to her, except,

indeed, as the tomb of those letters now lying in the dark, among the corks in the store-room chest? To avoid the danger of seeing them there constantly, she believed that it would be advisable to take away as few impressions of the place in her memory as possible, and so she strenuously resisted a haunting inclination to look back; not being sure besides, that, if yielded to, it would not have resolved itself into an impulse to stop the carriage and run back and fetch what had been left behind.

The struggle was a painful one, and when it was over and the distance from the maisonnette too great for any possibility of running back, a spirit of angry defiance took possession of Alma's mind. She knew what Madame de Florimel was thinking of, when she smiled that little smile, and she mentally pitted her own strength of will and power to carry out a purpose, against hers. There must be victory for her in the silent, unacknowledged struggle she foresaw, for how could she ever bear to remember what she had done, unless the results of her action were so triumphant as to carry her in a full tide of happiness over all temptation to regret.

END OF VOL. II.





